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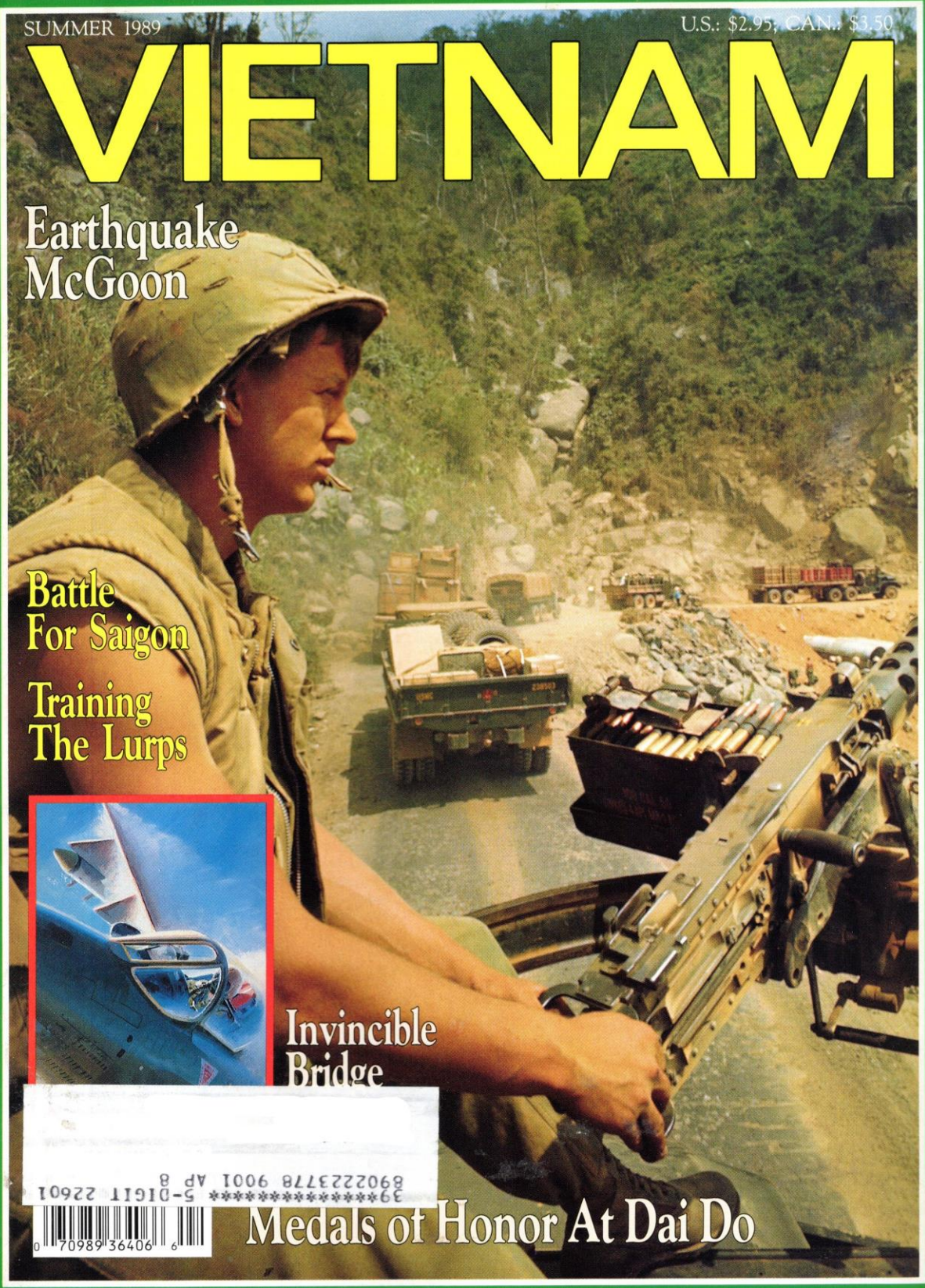

Earthquake McGoon

Battle For Saigon

Training The Lurps

Invincible Bridge

Medals of Honor At Dai Do

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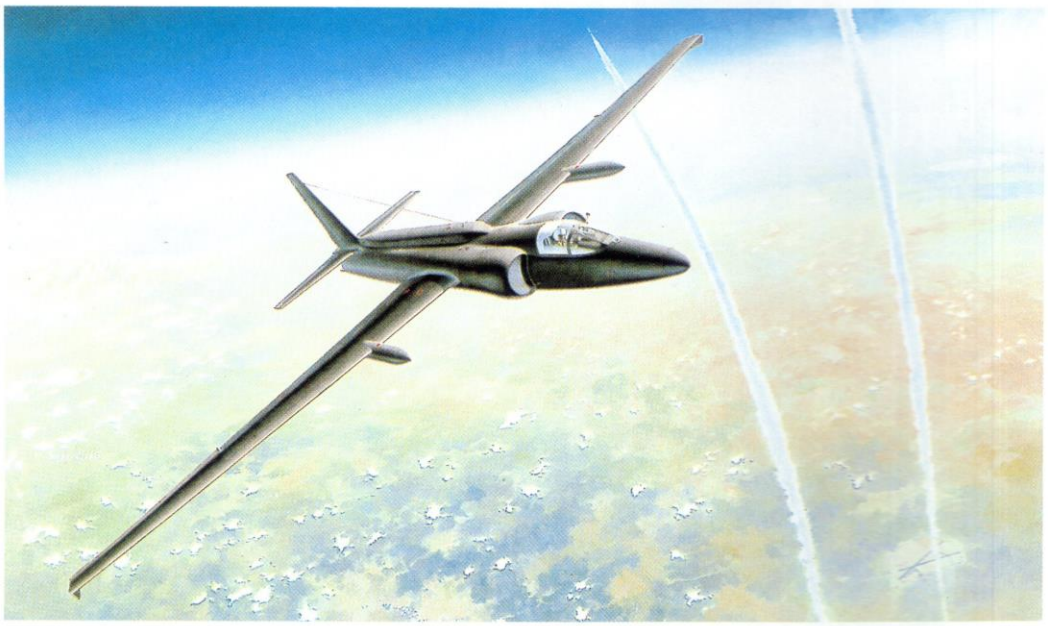
Turn For Home

by Shigeo Koike



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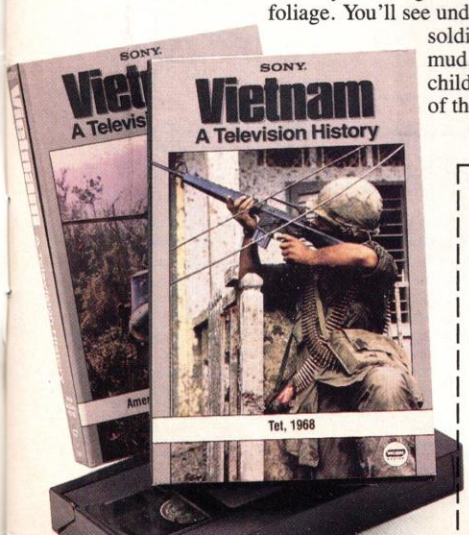

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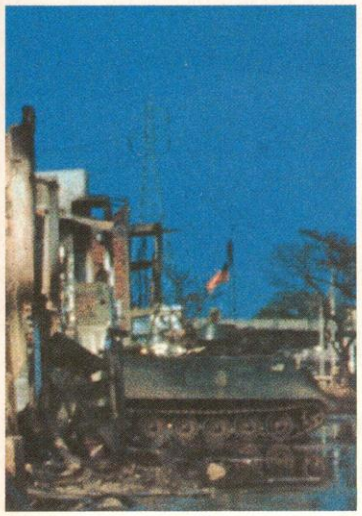

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At little-known Dai Do, an outnumbered Marine battalion defended a river supply line against an NVA division.

COVER: A Marine mans a .50-caliber machine gun in a tank convoy at Mai Van Pass. As Marines were given a growing role near the Demilitarized Zone between North and South Vietnam, they came into increasing contact with North Vietnamese Army regulars. The year 1968 saw three of their bloodiest encounters—Khe Sanh, Hue, and the less-known Battle of Dai Do (story, Page 42). LEFT: One day, the war seemed to be under control—practically over. The next, there was fighting in the streets of the South Vietnamese capital itself (story, Page 18). MIDDLE: The Vietnam War produced many legends—one of the most unlikely was an obstinate bridge (story, P. 34). RIGHT: They were called "The Walking Dead"—weary bodies concealing eyes, and reflexes alert for the ambush around the next corner (see Interview, P. 26).

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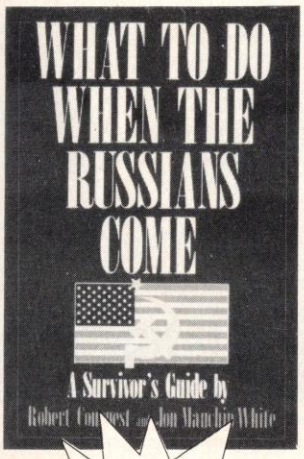

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Remembering Vietnam. Contrary to some of the critics, it's not a sin.

We're going bimonthly! Beginning with the next issue, *Vietnam* will be published six times a year. This is partly a result of the favorable publicity the magazine has received, including the former war correspondent Hugh Mulligan's Associated Press upbeat account of what we were about. Then there was the very favorable article by Jeffrey Goldberg featured on the front page of the *Washington Post's* business weekly section.

But too much favorable coverage on anything to do with Vietnam inevitably provokes a reaction.

Those of you who watched the *CBS Evening News* on Veteran's Day 1988 may have heard their claim that Vietnam memorabilia somehow demeans the Vietnam veteran.

Then there was the story in the January 16, 1989, issue of *Newsweek* about "Cashing in on Vietnam." While the article featured a photograph of our editorial staff and the comments on *Vietnam* magazine were straightforward, again the overall tone was that there is something unseemly about commercializing "what for many remains a wrenching memory." Especially singled out for criticism was sculptor Frederick Hart, creator of the "Three Fighting Men" statue at the Vietnam Veteran's Memorial.

There is more to this than meets the eye. It's not just the advertising that offends the critics; it's the very idea that Vietnam veterans might actually be proud of their service that drives them up the wall. There are many—and unfortunately many in the media—whose own egos demand that Vietnam veterans be downcast, apologetic and ashamed of their Vietnam service. That's why they ignore the 90-plus percent of Vietnam veterans who take pride in their accomplishments in Vietnam in favor of the two or three percent of anguished souls who fit what they choose to portray as the "typical" Vietnam vet.

Frederick Hart's statue of the "Three Fighting Men" portrays the bravery and dedication common to most Vietnam veterans. This is one reason Hart has come under attack from anti-war critics.

No wonder Hart and his "Three Fighting Men" statue was singled out for criticism. He sabotaged what critics intended as a lasting badge of shame. "There is something grossly at fault in the conception of the Vietnam War Memorial and the false veneration it excites," writes Henry Fairlie in the January 23, 1989, issue of *The New Republic*. "It is not, like the Iwo Jima Memorial, a monument to heroism, or even to sacrifice. It is a monument to a loss of life that is seen as wasteful and dishonorable."

You don't have to agree with that statement—and we certainly do not—to realize that many believe it so and some even intended it so. But such a characterization could never be made about Hart's statue. No wonder the critics single him out for "commercializing" that statue while ignoring the even more "commercialized" Iwo Jima statue. As they see it, you're supposed to be proud of Iwo Jima. With Vietnam, you're supposed to be ashamed.

We here at *Vietnam* magazine are also committed to portraying the Vietnam veteran in a true light. And we will no doubt continue to receive our share of criticism for refusing to portray the Vietnam veteran as a pitiful victim to be protected from his "exploiters." If there's any protecting to be done, we figure they're capable of doing it themselves. They did a pretty good job of it out in the jungle when it really counted.

Interestingly, while some are up in arms about Vietnam memorabilia, there are others eager to gather it to preserve a record of what Vietnam was all about. Among them is the Lyndon Baines Johnson Library and Museum. Located on the campus of the University of Texas at Austin, the library houses some 35,000,000 historical documents, and the museum, visited by more than 450,000 people each year, provides public viewing of historical exhibits.

Gary A. Yarrington, curator of the museum, told *Vietnam* magazine that while the collection has most of the official history of the Vietnam War, their goal now is to begin collecting from a more personal point of view. The museum is especially interested in "the letters written home to parents, wives, brothers, sisters, girlfriends, etc. Personal letters that complain about the food, the weather, the officers and speak of being lonely and afraid, humorous letters, political, all kinds.

"There are probably families with such letters," he said, "who realize their importance and wonder what to do with them. If given to the Johnson Library, the letters would become part of the permanent collection of a national institution. They would be used in research by the scholars who will write the definitive story of the war. They would also be used in major historical exhibitions that document the war for museum visitors."

Veterans or their families who have material to donate should write to: Gary A. Yarrington, Lyndon Baines Johnson Museum, 2313 Red River Street, Austin, Texas 78705 (telephone: 512-482-5137). Tell him *Vietnam* magazine sent you.

H.G.S.

VIETNAM

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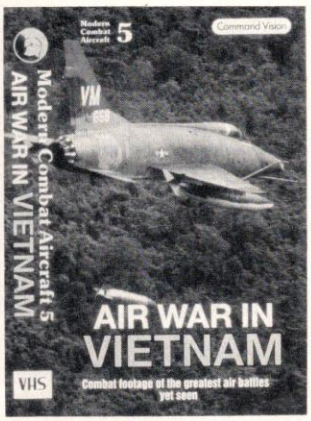
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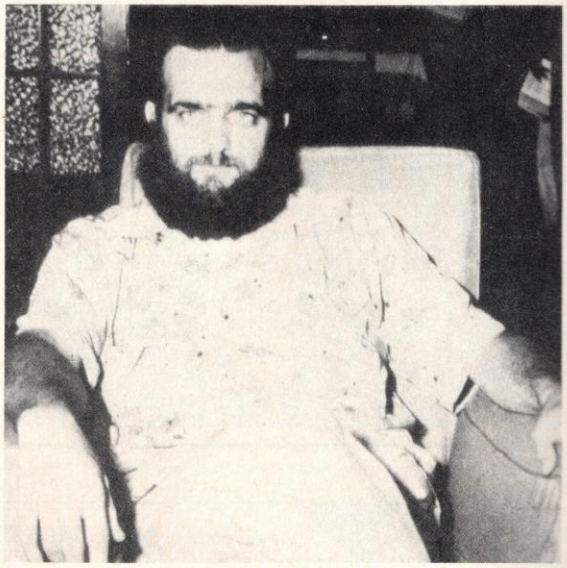
His nickname came from a comic strip, but Earthquake McGoon was more the stuff of legend.

By Wilfred P. Deac

Cleared for takeoff by the controller in the pagoda-shaped tower at the French naval air base of Cat Bi in northern Vietnam, the pilot of the C-119 designated Bird Two throttled his dual Pratt and Whitney engines toward their full 6,500 horsepower. He released the brakes, and the vibrating transport plane picked up speed, roaring down the runway of asphalt, concrete and steel mat. As big, powerful hands eased back on the control yoke, the aircraft—almost literally a high-winged box with twin tail booms—rose into the warm, humid air.

It was one of a flight of six Flying Boxcars bearing the blue-white-red roundel insignia of the French *Armée de l'Air.* Following a west-by-northwest course, the formation left the port of Haiphong and the adjoining Gulf of Tonkin behind to drone past the regional capital of Hanoi. The date was May 6, 1954, and dawned a surprisingly clear day for the onset of the monsoon season.



Menacingly big and endearingly personable, James B. McGovern had the nickname of a comic strip character and led the short but eventful life of an adventure novel.

The C-119s' destination, some 10 miles inside the mountainous Vietnam-Laos border, was a north-south valley that held the unimpressive crossroad village of Dien Bien Phu. Their cargoes were a variety of military equipment, food and medical supplies.

In the specially modified left cockpit seat of Bird Two was a man named James B. McGovern, Jr. His hefty bulk, which could vary from 225 to 300 pounds, had earned the veteran pilot a nickname lifted from a character in Al Capp's popular comic strip *Li'l Abner*—"Earthquake McGoon." McGovern, born in Elizabeth, N.J., on February 4, 1922, had shown an early interest in aviation. Upon graduating from high school, he enrolled in an aeronautical school. Two years as an engine test-stand operator with the Wright Aircraft Engineering Company in nearby Patterson followed. Then came World War II. He enlisted in the Army Air Force's aviation cadet program and soon won his wings.

McGovern then reported to the 23rd Fighter Squadron of General Claire Chennault's 14th Air Force, successor of the famed Flying Tigers, in November 1944. Although it was later said he became an ace by downing six Japanese planes with his P-51 Mustang, the official record credits him with two confirmed kills. Whatever the case, he decided to remain in Asia after V-J Day and transferred to a troop carrier squadron in Beijing, China.

Only one war in China had ended with the Japanese surrender. Now the decades-long bloody struggle between Chaing Kai-Shek's Nationalists and Mao Tse Tung's Communists for control of the country merely intensified. To provide Chiang's territory with an air transport system, Chennault helped set up CAT (Civil Air Transport) in October 1946. As the war turned against the Nationalists, CAT increasingly found itself flying supplies and weapons into besieged cities. Honorably discharged from the service, the irrepressible McGovern joined CAT in April 1947—and proceeded to build the legend that would ultimately enwrap his tremendous girth with a fact-dimming aura.

Although no one questioned his courage and flying skill, McGovern was a regulation military officer's nightmare. Tagged with such adjectives as "lazy" and "sloppy," he was described as tipping the scale "at an even 270 and...ugly to boot," often with a "fierce black beard to go with his fearsome build." He thrived on "buttered lima beans, peanuts, chili, Chinese food and good times." William Leary's authoritative history of CAT, entitled *Perilous Missions,* quotes a verse celebrating the transplanted New Jerseyite's reputation:

The rumor is growing apace
Of a behemoth creature who flies in the skies
With a lecherous smile on his face.
His three hundred pounds shake the earth when he walks,
Yet he soars with the grace of a loon.
Through all the Far East this fabulous beast
Is known as Earthquake McGoon.

It was said he always landed an airplane nose low because he couldn't pull the control column past his mountainous belly. His customary uniform consisted of an Hawaiian print shirt, wrinkled slacks and moccasins covering his incongruously small feet.

This was the man who once became involved in what was described as "a dizzy game of musical chairs" during the communist siege of Weifang in northeastern China. Flying a C-47, McGovern dropped off two other CAT pilots, Alvin Burridge and John Plank, to salvage

Continued on Page 64

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24-Karat Gold on Gleaming Black

The finish gleams like the black granite of "the Wall", the Vietnam Memorial. It is highly polished by hand, then given a special, high temperature oxidizing process that transforms the outer surface of the forged alloy receiver to an ultra-hard, high-gloss black that is next to a diamond in hardness. The barrel is mirror polished and blued to match.

Hand Engraved

The commemorative inscriptions are all *hand engraved* and gold-gilt infilled . . . the dragon—symbolic of war and of protection; the years of the war; "Lest We Forget"; and the proud name of this commemorative, in an engraved bamboo border. *Hand engraving is far more expensive and time consuming than other means,* but hand-engraved weapons are always worth more—and it's a military tradition for special presentation pieces.

As you hold this M16, your line of sight moves across the mirror polished carrying handle and barrel to the 24-karat gold plated flash suppressor. 24-karat gold-plating gleams across the trigger, selector lever, bolt catch, rear sight windage knob, forward bolt assist and the take-down pins.

Even the front and rear sling swivels are polished and 24-karat gold-plated and—as you'd expect with a firearm of this quality—mounted with a deluxe, black leather, adjustable, military sling.

Special, Textured Stocks

The ventilated Vietnam-era style handguard, pistol grip and butt stock shine with a special, black, heavily-textured finish, which further sets this apart from any other M16 ever made.

The pistol grip and butt stock are fitted with gold and black commemorative cloisonne medallions.

Not Just A Showpiece

But this is not just a showpiece. This is a firing Commemorative, the same size, configuration and specifications of the military-issue M16A1 rifle. A 20-round magazine and firing instructions are provided. As an advantage to arms collectors and veterans, it fires only in the semi-automatic mode (not full-automatic). *Anyone who can own a standard hunting rifle can own one.*

Free bipod

Each fires the 5.56mm (.223) ammunition used in Vietnam and readily available in gun shops. Because this M16 is functional, it could be called upon to defend your home and family.

The Vietnam War M16 is being custom built by gunsmiths who build M16s for our armed forces, our FBI, our CIA, our police SWAT teams and the governments of England, France, Australia, Canada, Switzerland, New Zealand and a half dozen other countries. They are the engineers and armorers of BFI, in Portland, Maine.

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As the *first* commemorative M16 ever issued, this is in the "first ever" class of distinction. This category has seen well-documented, significant price increases. From the standpoint of future investment value, only 1500 will be made—placing it among the rarest of the rare. The hand engraving further enhances this distinction.

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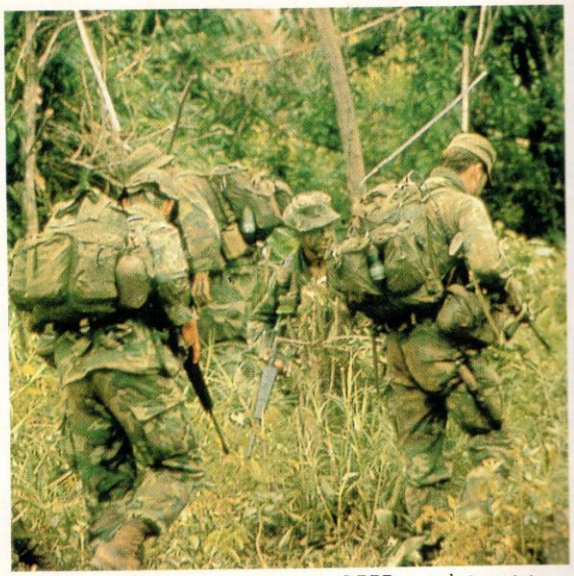
An irregular war fostered the LRRPs. The need for more "Lurps" produced MACV's Recondo School.

By Edward Rasen

The V, colors, black on light olive-drab background, stands for both valor and Vietnam, with the color combination meaning a capability for operations at day or at night. The insignia's arrowhead with tip pointed downward symbolizes air-to-ground methods of infiltration into enemy territory. But the arrowhead, fittingly enough, also represents survival and scouting skills perfected by the American Indian.

The word RECONDO embroidered in black letters across the top of the arrowhead is derived from three famous infantry terms—reconnaissance, commando and doughboy.

During the drawn-out Vietnam War, fewer than 3,000 men out of more than six million Free World personnel (American, South Vietnamese, Australian, Korean, Thai, New Zealanders and Filipino) were officially entitled to wear the distinctive pocket insignia marking the graduates of the MACV-5th Special Forces Group's hard-bitten Recondo School.



Usually specializing in reconnaissance, LRRPs put their training to more directly lethal use in operation Bushmaster, a long-range search and destroy mission, in August 1971.

As MACV Commander William C. Westmoreland once said, "Recondos are special men who must be smart, tough, courageous, confident and skilled."

Additionally, they were a final product of the Long-Range Reconnaissance Patrol (LRRP) concept that quickly emerged among the irregular forces in Vietnam that found themselves fighting a most "irregular" war right from the beginning. So *irregular*, it may be called, that personnel of the American OSS were with Viet Minh General Vo Nguyen Giap's victorious troops when they entered Hanoi at the end of World War II.

But that was another era, and it wasn't long before American Green Berets and other special, or irregular, forces were aligned with the South Vietnamese in their protracted struggle against the Communist forces, both regular and guerrilla, of the same General Giap. And it wasn't much longer before LRRP, or "Lurp," entered the standard Vietnam War vocabulary.

There are many starting points in tracing LRRP's evolution, but a major one was the 5th Special Forces Group, Airborne (5th SFG), which established its headquarters at Nha Trang, future home of the MACV Recondo School, in October 1964. The 5th SFG would count the U.S. Army's Green Berets as its core force, with as many as 3,740 men by 1969, but the 5th SFG also directed the often esoteric activities of some 40,000 irregulars of various kinds, countrywide.

Among the latter were outfits such as the airmobile strike force called "Eagle Flight," a ready-reaction, ambush or raiding force; or the Mobile Strike Force Commands (MSFC), also known as "Mike" forces.

The 5th SFG also had its hand in rescue and recovery operations. In one famous instance, the assignment was to recover the top-secret "black box" from a U-2 spy plane that had crashed in Cambodia. When the American-led 1st Mobile Guerrilla Force (MGF) found the crash site in the jungle, the box and its clues to secret U.S. codes were gone—taken by the enemy.

The 12 Americans and their 250 Cambodian mercenaries pressed on, following sandal tracks, until they reached a North Vietnamese Army (NVA) base camp, shot it up, and recovered the black box. The group had been led by Captain James "Bo" Gritz of the 5th SFG.

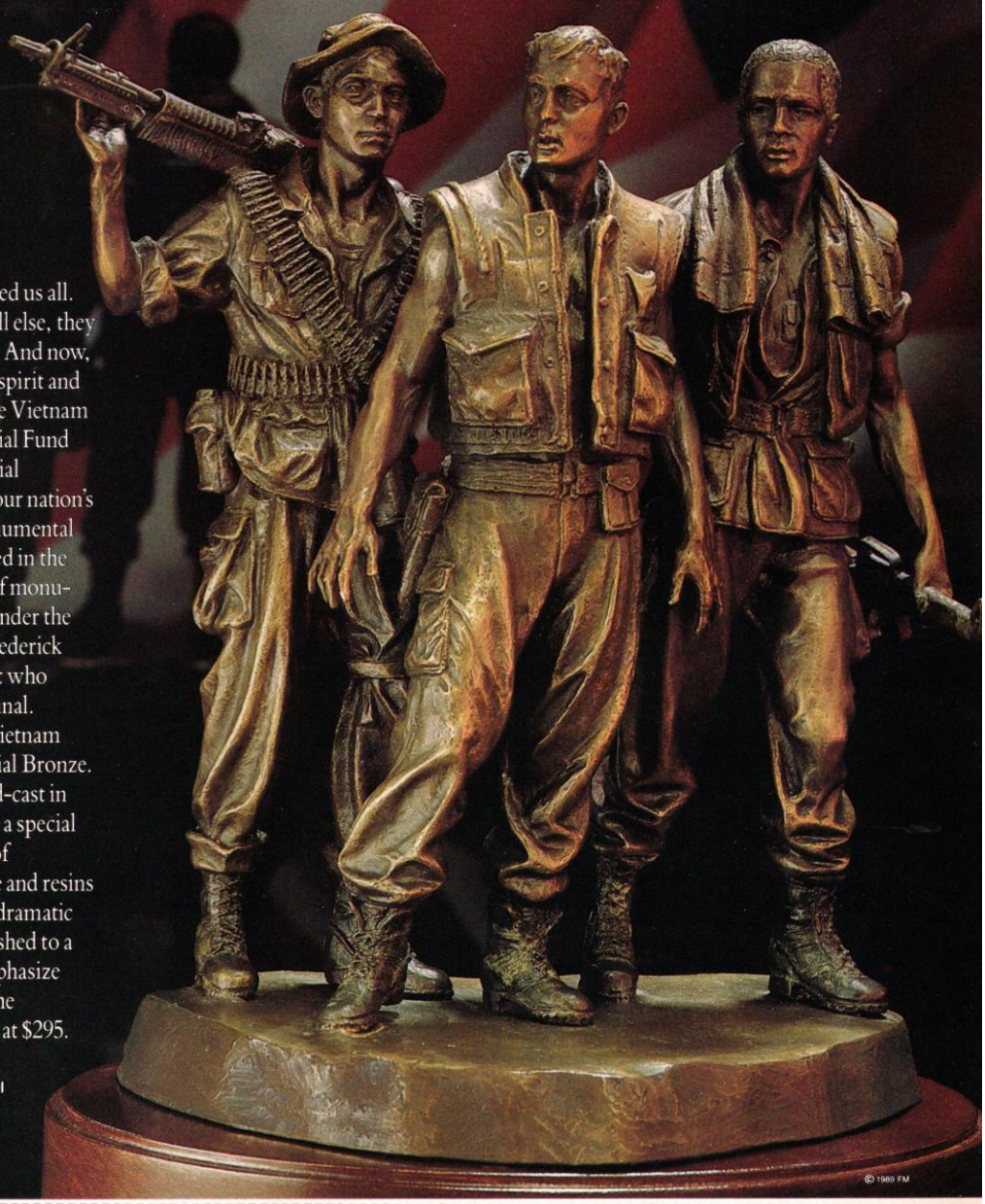
The same outfit, in the meantime, took over development of the LRRP concept begun under still another aegis or two—as Project Leaping Lena and Project Delta. Leaping Lena was the name for highly secret cross-border operations adopted by the innocuous-sounding Studies and Operations Group (SOG), *innocuous* except that SOG was the instigator of various "black" operations behind enemy lines: kidnappings, sabotage, assassination, rescue of prisoners and the like. Project Delta, an outgrowth of Lena, began as a training function in LRRP tactics.

After 5th SFG took over in May 1965, Delta (or Detachment B-52) continued its training in LRRP activities such as far-ranging reconnaissance, intelligence-gathering, forward air control, artillery spotting and special strike missions. Soon joined by Westmoreland-backed Sigma and Omega special reconnaissance "projects," Delta in 1966 extended its training function to regular U.S. infantry outfits needing the Lurp capability.

(The smaller Omega and Sigma evolved strike force capabilities that emerged in the form of Mobile Guerrilla Forces (MGF), such as that headed by "Bo" Gritz in recovery of the stricken U-2's

Continued on page 53

Our sons...our brothers...our friends.



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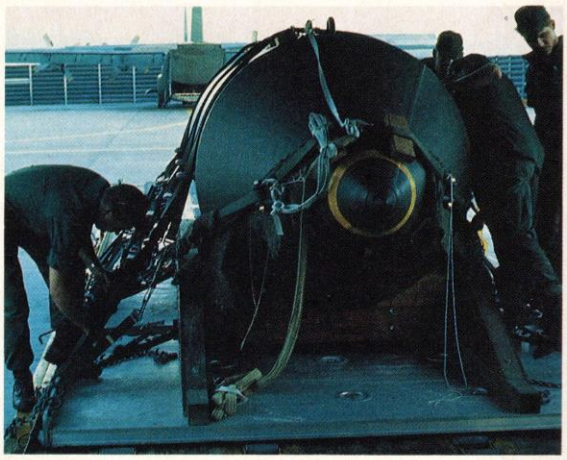
THE OFFICIAL VIETNAM VETERANS MEMORIAL BRONZE

"Daisy Cutters" in Vietnam meant blockbuster bombs that toppled trees and cleared landing zones.

By Tobin Carter

If Vietnam may be called "the helicopter war" because rotary-wing aircraft were used there in a variety of roles, not the least of which was as troop carriers to drop off patrols in the bush, to keep them supplied and then retrieve them when time came to bring them back to their base camps (and certainly it can), the fact still remains that the chopper was drastically hampered in mountainous terrain and triple-canopy foliage, with trees often reaching 400 feet into the air.

What few clearings there were in such dense foliage often were controlled by the enemy. When a helicopter assault came in to a clearing, crews and troops would find themselves on a "hot LZ," with enemy bullets flying in every direction—and most often aimed at the helicopter cockpits. Their crewmen endured the highest casualty rates of any aircrews operating in Vietnam, in some cases even higher than those endured by the line infantrymen who most often represented the American soldier in Vietnam.



Helicopters were often essential to success and even survival in Vietnam. The "Daisy Cutter" bomb's purpose was to clear an "instant LZ" in the foliage whenever one was needed. The ground crew seen securing it to its pallet gives some hint of the size of the 10,000-pound monster bomb, but not to its power.

Much effort and thought were put into devising a means of how to cope with the dense foliage of Southeast Asia and thus reduce casualties among helicopter crews and the troops debarking from the rotary-winged birds.

The solution finally discovered was one making use of a heavy and already existing item of military weaponry.

In the 1950s, the B-36 Peacemaker bomber of the Strategic Air Command (SAC) was the primary weapon of the U.S. Air Force—the mainstay of the nuclear strategy in the period. Although the B-36 was a nuclear bomber, as a product of World War II aircraft design it was suitable for the delivery of conventional weapons as well; 10,000-pound conventional bombs had already been developed for the B-36 in the event it might be used in a conventional war.

The B-36 was phased out of active service in the very early 'sixties, being replaced by the "hotter" B-52. The 10,000-pound bombs were stored in the New Mexican desert at the Air Force Weapons Center, Kirtland Air Force Base.

Years later, in 1968, someone happened to remember these huge weapons: Couldn't *they* be the solution to the problems faced by helicopter crews in Vietnam? Some U.S. Army planners thought so, and a study was put in motion to determine how best to use the old bombs.

The most obvious problem dealt with delivery. The weapons were aerial bombs, reflecting an Air Force mission, but there were no longer any USAF bombers capable of delivering weapons of such size. SAC's B-52s couldn't fit them in the planes' bomb bays, and fighter-bombers were incapable of transporting that much weight. There were two other possibilities—helicopter delivery, or the use of USAF cargo planes, to drop the bombs.

Helicopter delivery was a possibility, but the size of the weapons limited the chopper types that could transport the weapons. The Army's huge CH-54 Skycrane could carry just one such bomb, slung from a hoist, but the slow speed of the beast, coupled with the fact that the CH-54 could carry only one weapon at a time, made helicopter delivery an extremely expensive proposition.

Another alternative was the use of C-130 air cargo ships to deliver the bombs. The C-130 Hercules had a reputation for being an excellent platform for airdrop; airdrop of cargo was a normal mission for C-130 crews. The C-130 cargo compartment was large enough to accommodate two of the weapons at a time, and the airplane's range and speed made delivery of the weapons to anywhere in Vietnam quite feasible from a single loading point. But the Army wanted to use the helicopter, as this new mission would enhance the role of the Army's aviation units. Army CH-54s made the first test drops in Vietnam, but their slow speed and lack of range severely limited the final assessment of the tests.

One day in the summer of 1968, the two colonels who went to Vietnam to supervise the tests, one Air Force, one Army, rode as passengers aboard a C-130 from the 29th Tactical Airlift Squadron. The 29th was a unit of the 463rd Tactical Airlift Wing based at Clark Air Base, Philippines, as one of three C-130 wings providing aircraft and crews on a temporary-duty basis for airlift operations in Southeast Asia.

Pilot Major Robert Archer became involved in a conversation with the two officers. They revealed that the tests with the CH-54s had provided less than desirable results, and that they would be recommending the use of C-130s for delivering the bombs. By the time the two men reached their destination, the 463rd had been given the task, with Bob Archer as project officer.

Archer returned to the United States

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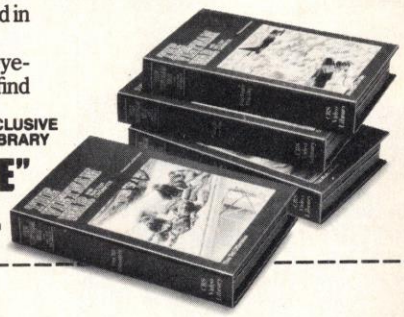

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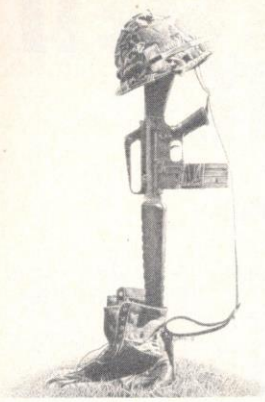

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for training in delivery techniques developed previously, when the bombs experimentally had been dropped from C-130s at Kirtland. He returned to Clark and proceeded to Vietnam with his crew to make operational test drops. Drops were made in October 1968, using the Air Force MSQ-77 ground radar sites at Plieku and Hue for guidance. In December, additional drops were made using Marine Corps radar. Then, in the spring of 1969, regular drops of the 10,000-pound bombs, identified as the M-121 weapons system, began.

From the start, it was apparent that the use of C-130s to deliver the bombs was an excellent choice. A single C-130 could take off from Cam Rhan with two bombs rigged for drop and fly to a target anywhere in Vietnam in less than an hour.

Many of the 463rd pilots had flown bombers in SAC, and all were qualified in cargo-drop techniques. The actual drop consisted primarily of flying headings issued from an MSQ-77 radar site. Release of the weapons was on signal from the ground controller.

To convert a C-130 from a trash-hauler to a bomber, only one permanent modification was needed—rewiring of the cargo compartment interphone system so that the loadmaster in the rear could monitor ground radio transmissions.

Each C-130 was equipped with the 463L cargo-handling and aerial delivery system, consisting of dual rails installed in the cargo compartment to facilitate easy handling of palletized cargo and to allow airdrop of platform loads. The bombs were rigged on wooden cradles and secured to modular airdrop platforms that fit into the aircraft rails.

Actual delivery of the weapon was with an extraction parachute identical to those used for cargo drops, although the procedures were modified somewhat. At one minute from release, the copilot would release the extraction parachute into the slipstream using an electrical switch on the cockpit console. During the final minute to the release, the extraction parachute would be fully deployed in the aircraft slipstream, while the load was restrained by the locks on the right side of the aircraft. When the ground controller called out, "Five, four, three, two, one, HACK!" the loadmaster would pull the emergency release handle on the dual rails, allowing all aft restraint to be relaxed; the load would be out of the airplane and on its way in a flash.

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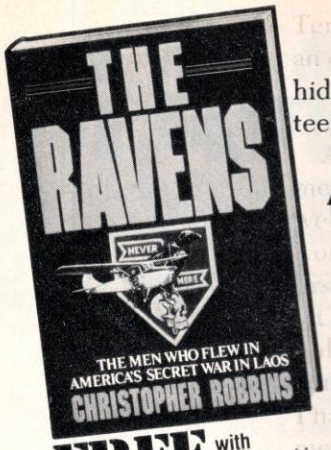

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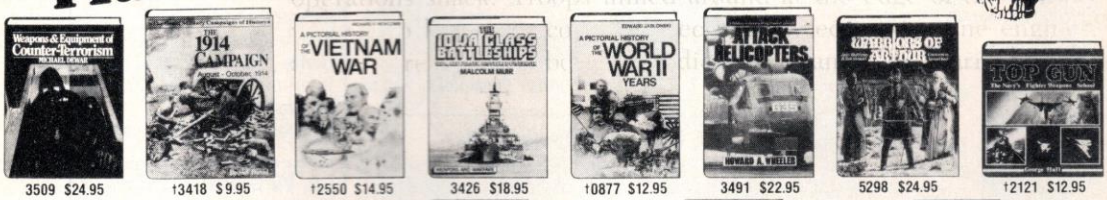

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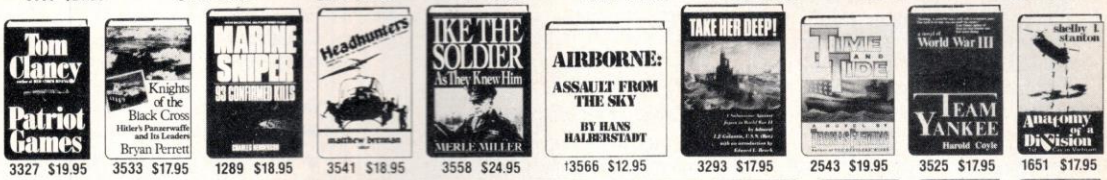

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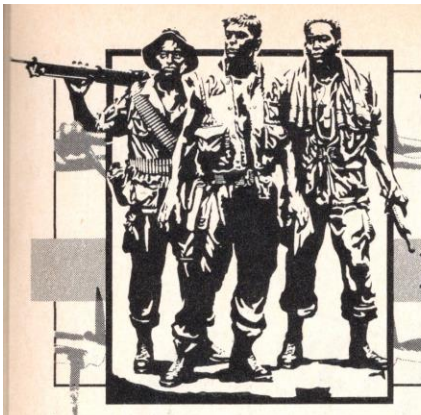

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chute. A tree-penetrator fuse on the nose of the bomb would be activated by a tiny propeller. Contact with trees triggered an immense airburst that felled all trees in the immediate area, "like daisies." The result would be a circular clearing large enough to accommodate from one to three helicopters at a time.

If the nose fuse failed to detonate the 20-year-old bombs, a timed fuse at the tail would set it off.

To enhance the ground radar controller's image of the airplane, a small transponder was taped to a window in the cargo compartment.

One unique aspect of the C-130 bombing mission was that the weapons were released by enlisted loadmasters, the only Air Force enlisted men to release an aerial weapon in Vietnam.

Although the primary purpose of the "daisy cutters" was to cut down trees to make helicopter landing zones, the weapons quite often were used against enemy troops as well. It was not uncommon for the Army to designate an enemy base camp as an "LZ." Bombs also were dropped on top of mountain peaks, leveling the terrain somewhat so that troops could be landed right on top.

The resulting LZ could be enlarged with chain saws and explosives into a fire base. If desired, two bombs could be dropped adjacent to one another, so the cleared areas would overlap.

When Allied troops invaded Cambodia in 1970, they assaulted onto LZs created by BLU-82 15,000-pound follow-on bombs that were developed as the supply of 10,000-pound M-121s dwindled. The BLU-82 looked like a large propane tank—perhaps because that is what it was! Each BLU-82 contained a slurry mixture of propane and TNT. Drop techniques for the M-121 and BLU-82 systems were identical.

During the Lam Son 719 mission into Cambodia, several BLU-82 missions were flown, both to create LZs and to destroy enemy troop concentrations. When the 463rd was inactivated in 1971, the mission of dropping the bombs passed to the 374th Tactical Airlift Wing, the last C-130 wing to operate in Southeast Asia.

In the very last days of the Vietnam War, the South Vietnamese Air Force (VNAF) was given a supply of BLU-82s for use against Communist forces. One bomb, detonated near the town of Xuan Loc, reportedly killed more than 500 Communist troops and created temporary confusion among the rest in the advancing army. More BLU-82s were airlifted into Tan Son Nhut from Clark AFB right up until the final day of the Vietnam War. The last U.S. military airplane to be destroyed in South Vietnam was a C-130 that had flown into Tan Son Nhut with two BLU-82s for the VNAF. □

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VIETNAM VETS ★ AMERICA'S BEST ★ THEN AND NOW

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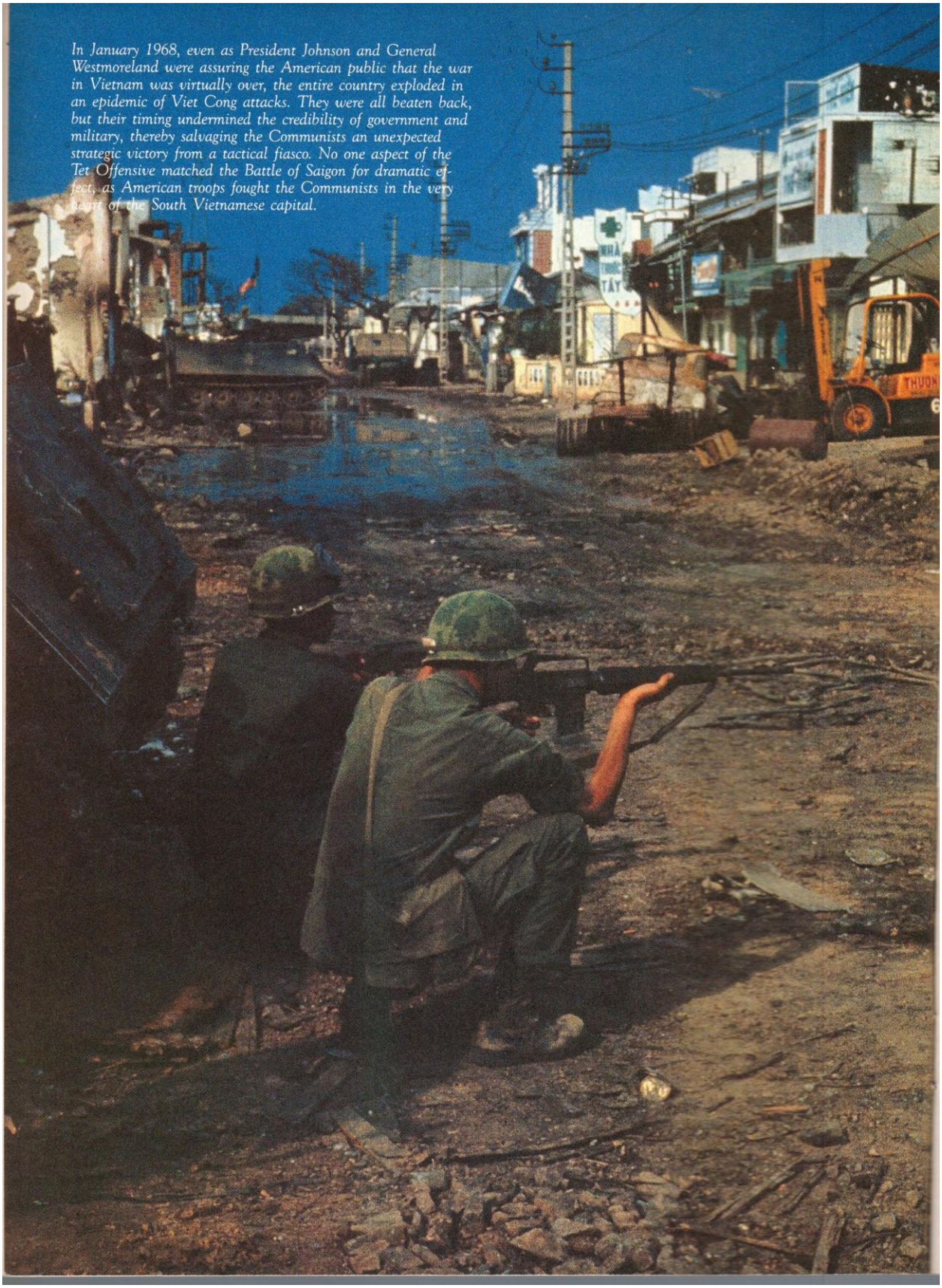


In January 1968, even as President Johnson and General Westmoreland were assuring the American public that the war in Vietnam was virtually over, the entire country exploded in an epidemic of Viet Cong attacks. They were all beaten back, but their timing undermined the credibility of government and military, thereby salvaging the Communists an unexpected strategic victory from a tactical fiasco. No one aspect of the Tet Offensive matched the Battle of Saigon for dramatic effect, as American troops fought the Communists in the very heart of the South Vietnamese capital.

BATTLE FOR SAIGON

In the Tet Offensive of 1968, the Viet Cong prepared carefully for its objectives inside the Saigon Circle. The result would be a plethora of battles—and battles within battles.

By David T. Zabecki

In early July 1967, a top-ranking North Vietnamese Army (NVA) general died in a military hospital in Hanoi. For many years after, it was reported that he had been killed by an American B-52 strike. More recently, it has been suggested that he actually died from a heart attack. Regardless of the cause, however, the timing of his death had profound impact on the North Vietnamese decision-making process that led to the Tet Offensive.

Senior General Nguyen Chi Thanh had been the top-ranking North Vietnamese military commander in the South. Aside from Defense Minister Vo Nguyen Giap, he was the only other man to hold four-star rank in the NVA. He was also a major political power—for 17 years he had been a member of North Vietnam's ruling Politburo. He also had been a longtime opponent of Giap's policy of meeting America's military might head-on. But now his voice was stilled. Immediately following Thanh's state funeral on July 6, the Politburo met to consider Giap's plan to bring the war to a speedy and successful conclusion.

The war had not been going well for the Communists. Thanh's Viet Cong (VC) and NVA troops in the South had been losing in every encounter with the Americans since taking a bloody pounding in the Ia Drang Valley in 1965. Thanh thought it was madness to try to compete with superior U.S. firepower and mobility. He wanted to scale back operations and conduct a protracted guerrilla struggle, slowly grinding down the American will to continue. Giap, the victor of Dien Bien Phu, wanted to stage another master stroke, bringing America quickly to its knees. With Thanh now dead, there was no other voice of dissent in the Politburo.

The key to Giap's plan was the concept of the "General Offensive," borrowed from Chinese Communist doctrine. Following the General Offensive, in a one-two punch combination, would come the "General Uprising," wherein the people of the South would rally to the Communist cause and bring down the Saigon government. The General Uprising was a distinctly Vietnamese element of revolutionary dogma.

The success of Giap's plan depended on three key assumptions: that the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) would not fight and would collapse under the initial impact; that the people of the South would follow through with the General Uprising; that faced with an overwhelming shock action, the American will to continue would crack.

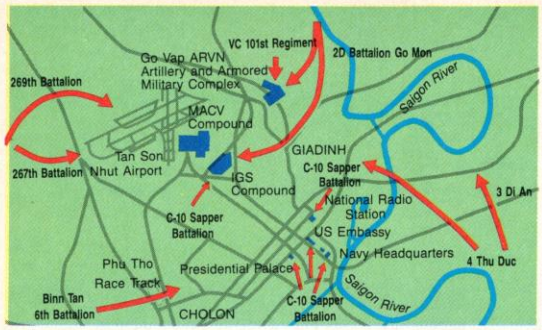
The timing of the General Offensive was set for Tet 1968, the beginning of the Lunar New Year: The Year of the Monkey. Tet is by far and away the most important holiday of the Vietnamese year. It is almost impossible for a Westerner to understand its significance. It's like Christmas, Thanksgiving, the Fourth of July and your birthday, all rolled into one.

Giap's buildup and staging of the Tet Offensive was a masterpiece of deception. General instructions were sent to units in the field, but the exact timing and specific unit objectives of the attacks were withheld until the last moment.

Starting in the fall of 1967, Giap staged a series of bloody, but seemingly pointless, battles in the border regions and in the north of the country near the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ). On October 29, the 273rd VC Regiment attacked the district capital of Loc Ninh, in the "Fishhook" region northwest of Saigon. On November 23, the 4th NVA Regiment launched a major attack on Dak To. In early January 1968, several NVA divisions began to converge on the isolated U.S. Marine outpost at Khe Sanh, in the northern ARVN I Corps Area, near the DMZ.

All of these actions were part of Giap's "peripheral campaign," designed to draw U.S. units out of the urban areas and toward the borders. For the most part, they were carried out by NVA troops, while VC units moved into their Tet jump-off positions, built up their supplies and rehearsed. In the case of the 273rd VC Regiment's attack at Loc Ninh, captured enemy documents later revealed that the purpose of that battle had been to give the Viet Cong experience in conventional attack formations.

The Communist military leadership used the 1967 Christmas cease-fire to good advantage. Senior commanders used the truce to reconnoiter their assigned objectives. On Christmas Day, Colonel Nam Truyen, commander of the 9th VC



TOP: The Tet Offensive's strategy was simple: Hit the enemy everywhere, and inspire a general popular uprising. The risks involved were dilution of Communist forces and their exposure to America's awesome conventional arsenal. MIDDLE: Viet Cong make satchel charges and other explosives from recovered defective enemy artillery shells in preparation for their coming offensive. ABOVE: As a machine gun moves up into covering position, Viet Cong soldiers charge into the suburbs of Saigon—and unexpectedly stiff resistance.

Division, slipped into Saigon with forged papers identifying him as a student returning home for the holiday. Once inside the city, he made a thorough tour around the perimeter of Tan Son Nhut Air Base, one of his primary targets.

By December 15, 1967, the U.S. Command had turned over sole responsibility for the defense of Saigon to the South Vietnamese military, a gesture of confidence in the growing reliability of the ARVN. The main task of securing Saigon was assigned to the 5th ARVN Ranger Group, supported in turn by the 2nd Battalion, 13th Artillery, the only U.S. combat unit remaining inside the city itself. Meanwhile, 39 maneuver battalions from the U.S. II Field Forces (an organization essentially the same as a corps) were earmarked for a campaign against the VC and NVA base camps near the Cambodian border. By the time of Tet, only 14 U.S. and Free World maneuver battalions were scheduled to be inside the so-called "Saigon Circle," a 29-mile zone around the capital.

Lieutenant General Fredrick C. Weyand, Commander of II Field Forces, didn't like the pattern he was seeing. His troops in the border regions were experiencing too few contacts, and enemy radio traffic around Saigon was getting heavier. On January 10, 1968, Weyand (a former intelligence officer and future Chief of Staff of the U.S. Army) went to see his boss, General William C. Westmoreland, with his concerns. He convinced Westmoreland to allow a shift of some of II Field Forces' combat power back inside the Saigon Circle. (When the attacks did come, 27 maneuver battalions were back inside the Circle. Weyand's call on Westmoreland may well have been the single most decisive decision of the entire battle.)

By late January, intelligence estimates placed 20,000 to 40,000 NVA troops around Khe Sanh. General Westmoreland was now convinced that the enemy would violate any Tet truce. Still believing that the main enemy effort would be in the north, he requested the U.S. and South Vietnamese governments to cancel the cease-fire in the ARVN I Corps tactical zone.

The initial blow fell at Khe Sahn on January 21. From that point until the city attacks erupted at Tet, the attention of the entire U.S. military and the National Command Structure was riveted on the far-flung Marine outpost. The press started making comparisons between Khe Sanh and Dien Bien Phu; Khe Sanh became an obsession for President Johnson, who had a scale model of the battlefield installed in the White House Situation Room.

When the main attacks on the cities finally came, Giap's plan didn't exactly go off without a hitch. The secrecy of his buildup cost him something in coordination. At 12:15 on the morning of January 30, Da Nang, Pleiku, Nha Trang and nine other cities in the center of Vietnam came under attack. The assaults were premature—units in the Viet Cong's Military Region 5 had jumped off one day too early. General Westmoreland's intelligence chief, Brig. Gen. Phillip B. Davidson, told him to expect the same thing country-wide by the next day. At 9:45 that morning, the Allies canceled the Tet cease-fire for the remainder of the country. At 11:25 all U.S. units were ordered to full alert. The maneuver units inside the Saigon Circle were ordered to take up blocking positions around Saigon and around the nearby Long Binh-Bien Hoa military complex. An element of surprise had been lost.

At 1:30 in the morning on January 31, the presidential palace in Saigon was attacked by a 14-man platoon from the Viet Cong's C-10 Sapper Battalion. By 3:40 a.m., Hue, far in the north, was under attack. The Tet Offensive was in full swing.

Before the day was over, five of six autonomous cities, 36 of 44 provincial capitals, and 64 of 245 district capitals had been attacked. Except for Khe Sahn, Hue and the Saigon Circle, however, the fighting was over in just a few days. But even after the first full day of nationwide fighting, the Allied Com-

mand still didn't have a clear picture of what was happening. In a press conference late on January 31, General Westmoreland was still maintaining that the attacks on the cities and Saigon were diversions for the main effort at Khe Sanh and the DMZ, instead of the other way around.

Perhaps the clearest indicator of the importance the enemy placed on the Saigon Circle objective was reflected in the Communist command structure for the attacks. The entire operation was under the command of Lt. Gen. Tran Van Tra, the second highest ranking officer in the NVA since the death of General Thanh the previous July. Just prior to Christmas, Tra had shifted his headquarters from the "Fishhook" area of Cambodia and taken up residence on the outskirts of Saigon, at the headquarters of Colonel Tran Van Dac, the chief VC political officer for the area. They were joined there by Maj. Gen. Tran Do, the VC commander for the operation.

The Communist command had eight major objectives for the Saigon Circle. With these objectives achieved, they believed, would come the crippling of the Saigon government, and with that, the General Uprising. A combined force of 35 battalions, organized into one NVA and two VC divisions, was committed.

Singularly or in combination, the VC and NVA units were to seize and neutralize the key command, control and communications centers inside Saigon; seize the artillery and armor depots at Go Vap; and neutralize Tan Son Nhut Air Base and the MACV command center. Further, they would seize the Cholon section of Saigon; destroy the Newport Bridge linking Saigon to Long Binh-Bien Hoa on Highway 1; seize the massive U.S. logistics center at Long Binh; neutralize the U.S. Air Base at Bien Hoa; and neutralize the II Field Forces and III ARVN Corps command centers.

Finally, they were to block any attempts by the U.S. 25th Infantry Division to reinforce Saigon from Chu Chi along Highway 1 and block any attempts by the U.S. 1st Infantry Division to reinforce Saigon from Lai Khe along Highway 13.

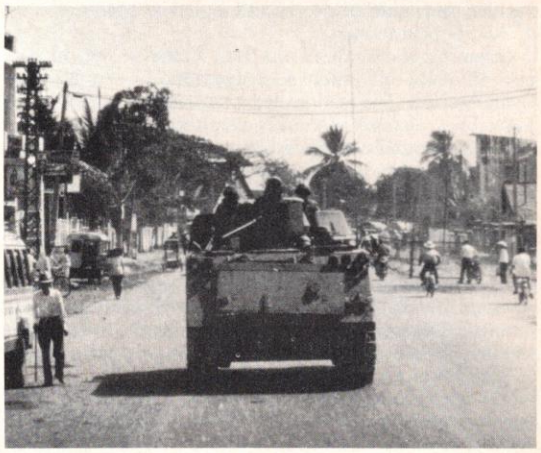
During the early hours of January 31, General Weyand sat in his Tactical Operations Center (TOC) at Long Binh, watching the battle sites on his operations map light up "like a pinball machine." Between 3 a.m. and 5 a.m., he ordered the nearly 5,000 American combat troops under his immediate control into action. Later that morning, he ordered his deputy commander, Maj. Gen. Keith Ware, into Saigon to take command of all the U.S. forces Weyand was sending into the city. As a battalion commander in World War II, General Ware had won the Medal of Honor. A few months after Tet, he would assume command of the 1st Infantry Division, the "Big Red One," only to die shortly thereafter in a helicopter crash.

As the morning of the thirty-first dragged on and Weyand's forces were stretched thinner and thinner, his most pressing problem turned out to be the one that was probably the most militarily insignificant: the U.S. Embassy in Saigon.

At about 2:15 on the morning of the thirty-first, a taxicab pulled onto Thong Nhut Boulevard and drove past the American Embassy. When machine-gun fire from the cab raked the front gate, the two MPs on duty, SP4 Charles L. Daniel and PFC William E. Sebast, slammed it shut and immediately radioed for help. The compound was under assault by a 19-man platoon of the C-10 Sapper Battalion.

Rather than assault the gate directly, the sappers went farther down along the street and blew a hole in the wall with C-4 plastic explosive. Once inside the compound, they killed Selbast and Daniel, but not before the two MPs managed to kill the VC platoon leader and his assistant. The sappers blew open the doors of the chancery with a B-40 rocket, but for some reason they never entered the building. It wouldn't have been hard, for there were only three U.S. Marines inside.

Deprived of their leader, the sappers just sat inside the compound and exchanged shots with the MPs on the outside who



TOP: The author's unit, Company C, 2nd Battalion, 47th Infantry, moves into alert positions northeast of Bien Hoa in late afternoon, January 30, 1968. Typically, the troops prefer the risk of sniper fire to being caught inside if their M-113 armored personnel carrier (APC) encounters a mine or rocket. MIDDLE: Another APC moves down a suburban street in Saigon as the Tet Offensive erupts. ABOVE: Taking cover beside two dead comrades, military police fight their way back into the U.S. Consulate next to the U.S. Embassy.

had responded to PFC William Sebast's earlier call for help.

Weyand, meanwhile, was under heavy pressure from his headquarters to regain control of the embassy. At 5 a.m. he sent a helicopter carrying troops from the 101st Airborne Division. They tried to land on the chancery roof but were driven off by heavy fire from the sappers on the ground. Another air insertion was attempted at 8 a.m.; this one succeeded and soon all the VC sappers were dead.

Elsewhere in the city, another platoon of the C-10 Battalion hit gate Number 5 of the ARVN Joint General Staff (JGS) compound at 2 a.m. The first attack was driven back, and the 1st and 2nd VC Local Force Battalions were brought up to continue the assault. At 4 a.m. a truckload of American MPs from the 716th MP Battalion was racing to answer a trouble call from an American officers' billet near JGS headquarters. The MPs were ambushed in an alley by a VC company on its way to the same JGS compound. The resultant fight in the alley lasted 12 hours. Sixteen American MPs were killed and 21 were wounded. Meanwhile, other VC forces managed to get inside the JGS compound about 9:30 a.m., but they were quickly ejected and routed by a reaction force of ARVN paratroopers.

A few blocks north of the U.S. Embassy, yet another platoon of the ubiquitous C-10 Battalion hit the National Radio Station. The station had been reinforced during the night by a platoon of ARVN paratroopers, almost all of whom were soundly asleep on the station roof when the attack started. The sappers took up positions in an adjacent apartment building where they could fire down on the ARVN soldiers. After killing all the paratroopers, the sappers had little difficulty taking over the station. They were accompanied by an NVA radio specialist who carried prerecorded broadcast tapes announcing the fall of the Saigon government and the so-called General Uprising. Their plans fell apart at the last moment, however, when the night crew at the transmission site 14 miles away shut down the link on a prearranged signal.

The ARVN depot complex at Go Vap, on the northern edge of the city, was the primary objective of the 101st VC Regiment. The plan called for the capture of ARVN tanks from the Phu Dong Armored Headquarters and howitzers from the Co Lao Artillery Headquarters. These heavy weapons were then to be used to assault the east end of Tan Son Nhut Air Base, about one mile away. Troops specially trained to operate the weapons accompanied the attack forces. Both assaults were successful, but once inside Phu Dong, the VC discovered that the tanks had been moved elsewhere two months prior. At Co Lao, the VC managed to capture 12 105mm howitzers, but the weapons were disabled at the last minute when the withdrawing ARVN troops had the presence of mind to remove the firing locks. A few hours later, the Go Vap complex was retaken by the 4th Vietnamese Marine Corps Battalion.

The following day, just north of the city, the U.S. 1st Infantry Division turned the tables on the force that was supposed to block the "Big Red One" from reinforcing Saigon. Moving southeast along Highway 13, the Americans ran into the 273rd VC Regiment, the same unit that had hit the district capital of Loc Ninh the previous October. The VC took up defensive positions near Phu Loi but were caught there by the Division's artillery and sealed in the box by the infantry. Two days and 3,493 artillery rounds later, the 273rd had been virtually destroyed as an effective fighting unit.

During the evening of January 30, a large VC force infiltrated the Vinatexco textile factory across Highway 1 from Tan Son Nhut. At about 3:20 the next morning, three VC battalions (the D16, the 267th and a battalion from the 271st VC Regiment) stormed the western side of the air base, which also housed the command for MACV (Military Assistance Command, Vietnam). Secondary attacks were also launched against the north and east gates. Even though the armor and artillery that were supposed to come from Go Vap never arrived, the western perimeter was breached and the Communist forces made it onto the runway.

The base was defended by an oddly assorted reaction force consisting of the 377th Security Police Squadron, two platoons of MACV Headquarters' guard force, the ARVN 52nd Regional Force Battalion, and Vice-President Nguyen Cao Ky's bodyguard. The base's only reserve consisted of two companies from the ARVN 8th Airborne Battalion, men who had been sitting in the Tan Son Nhut terminal awaiting air transport north, where they had been ordered to reinforce the DMZ. By 4:15 a.m. this reserve had been committed—attackers and defenders were fighting hand-to-hand on the western end of the runway. Calls for help went out to the U.S. 25th Infantry Division at Cu Chi, about 15 miles northwest of Saigon.

The 3rd Squadron, 4th Cavalry, had already been alerted for a possible relief mission to Tan Son Nhut. When the call came through, the squadron commander, Lt. Col. Glenn K. Otis, was ordered to immediately commit his Troop C. As the armored cavalry troop, under the command of Captain Leo B. Virant, raced down Highway 1 in the dark, Otis flew overhead in his command-and-control helicopter, harassing Viet Cong ambush sites from the air and guiding the troops

TET MISPERCEPTIONS

The Tet Offensive of 1968 has come to be regarded as a massive U.S. intelligence failure on the order of the Battle of the Bulge. It wasn't that a large-scale enemy action wasn't expected; it was the size of the action, the level of coordination, and the nature of the targets that ultimately came as a surprise. The indicators were there, but hindsight is always 20/20—especially in intelligence.

On November 19, 1967, troops of the 101st Airborne Division captured a Communist party document calling for the General Offensive/General Uprising and the takeover of Saigon. It was dismissed as merely a piece of morale-boosting propaganda. Other captured documents said the same sort of thing, however, and as 1967 came to a close, the rate of enemy defections had dropped off sharply, a clear indicator something big was coming.

But the enemy had been solidly beaten at every turn for the past two years. He just couldn't have the capabilities to mount such an effort. As one intelligence officer put it: "If we'd gotten the whole battle plan, it wouldn't have been believed. It wouldn't have been credible to us."

Another factor that caught Allied intelligence flat-footed was the exact timing of the attacks. By the end of December, most intelligence analysts were predicting large-scale enemy actions just prior to, or just after, Tet. Almost no one thought it even remotely possible that the Communists would violate Tet itself. But historical precedents were there. The first major battle of the Second Indochina War took place in 1960, when the Viet Cong attacked an ARVN headquarters in Tay Ninh at Tet. And in 1789, Vietnam's national hero, Emperor Quang Trung, ousted the Chinese from Hanoi with a surprise Tet attack. In Vietnamese history, the event is roughly the equivalent of Washington's celebrated Christmas night attack on the Hessians at Trenton, N.J.

Ironically, General Westmoreland even had a statue of Quang Trung displayed in his Saigon living quarters.

March 1968, meanwhile, was a high-rotation month for the U.S. 9th Infantry Division. The unit had arrived in Vietnam a little more than a year be-

around the danger zones by means of flares dropped nearby.

One platoon of Troop C was left to secure the Hoc Mon Bridge, just north of the base. Colonel Otis then returned to Cu Chi to rearm and refuel, and the rest of Troop C crashed into the rear of the three VC battalions at about 6 a.m. The VC responded with rocket-propelled grenades (RPG). About one-third of the armored column was destroyed and Captain Virant was seriously wounded, but the cohesion of the VC attack was badly disrupted.

American troopers from the destroyed vehicles were fighting from the ditch alongside the highway and rapidly running out of ammunition. Unable to establish contact with Allied forces inside the base, Troop C radioed back to Cu Chi for help. Colonel Otis got the call and immediately headed back for Tan Son Nhut. The platoon guarding the Hoc Mon Bridge was committed first and arrived at 7:15 a.m. Otis then called in his air cavalry troop. Ammo was brought in by air, and the wounded were evacuated. Otis directed the air troop's gunships against the attackers.

Troop B was then called in from its alert position about 30 miles away. It raced down Highway 1 and reached Tan Son Nhut in about 45 minutes. Otis positioned the new arrivals across the enemy's north flank, effectively putting the VC in a right angle between two armored columns. More gunships and artillery pounded the enemy, now firmly fixed in the "L." By 10 a.m., the VC attack folded. Many Viet Cong fled back into the textile mill, which was later leveled by air strikes. Around the base perimeter, mop-up operations continued well into the night.

The 3rd Squadron, 4th Cavalry, was later awarded the Presidential Unit Citation for the fight. Four members of the squadron, including Otis, received the Distinguished Service Cross. Twenty years after the fight at Tan Son Nhut, Glenn K. Otis retired from the Army as the four-star general in command of the U.S. Army in Europe.

Thirteen miles to the east, the Long Binh-Bien Hoa complex was simultaneously attacked by the 5th VC Division. There, too, the battle was decided by armored and mechanized forces. The previous night, the 9th Division's 2nd Battalion, 47th Infantry (Mechanized), under the command of Lt. Col. John B. Tower, had moved into alert positions outside the cities. At 4:45 on the morning of the thirty-first, General Weyand ordered the battalion forward.

Company A was sent to relieve the attack on a large Allied POW compound maintained between the two cities on Highway 1. Company B was sent to reinforce the already-breached perimeter of the Long Binh ammo dump. Company C, commanded by Captain John Gross, was sent to relieve the attack on the ARVN III Corps headquarters in Bien Hoa City.

Company B arrived at the ammo dump at 6:30 a.m. Some of the soldiers joined in the fight to eject the intruders, while others helped ordnance personnel remove and disarm satchel charges already placed in many bunkers by VC sappers. Company A, meanwhile, attacked from the Long Binh base across Highway 1 into elements of the 275th VC Regiment in Ho Nai Village and "Black Widow Village"—so called by U.S. troops because many widows of VC officers were thought to live there.

To reach the ARVN III Corps headquarters, Company C had to fight its way through the middle of the 275th VC Regiment astride Highway 1 and through the flank of the 274th VC Regiment attacking Bien Hoa Air Base. At 5:45 a.m., it plowed into the rear of the 238th VC Battalion attacking the III Corps compound. Company C attacked from the march column and overran the besieged ARVN position.

Company C continued to fan out from the III Corps compound, fighting house to house through the city. After months of jungle fighting, the men of Company C suddenly found themselves engaged in World War II-style city fighting. As disorienting as the abrupt change was for the Americans, they adapted to it much faster than their enemy. M79 grenade launchers were used with deadly effect against VC riflemen firing from the upper stories of buildings. When Bien Hoa City was finally cleared by 5:30 that evening, Company C had taken only eight walking wounded. One of the company's several pet dogs was also wounded when an RPG hit an M113 armored personnel carrier (APC). The troops later obtained a "Purple Heart" for the dog. (Company C had more than its share of dog lovers.)

While Company C fought to secure Bien Hoa City, Troop A of the 9th Division's 3rd Squadron, 5th Cavalry, was sent to relieve the attack on Bien Hoa Air Base. The troop, commanded by Captain Ralph B. Garretson, had to move 18 miles down Highway 1 and run the same gauntlet as Company C. At the town of Trang Bom, Troop A was hit by a company-sized ambush, but just rolled right through it, the men firing as they went. Ten miles from Bien Hoa, they were momentarily stopped cold when the VC blew a highway bridge after Troop A's first tank rolled across. The troop's M113s could ford the stream, but the tanks could not. After a hasty fording operation, Troop A was once again on the move, but with only one of its tanks.

The cavalry column had to fight through Bien Hoa city to reach the air base. It lost two APCs, a loss reducing the relief force to only one tank and eight

fore. Many of its troops rotated back to the United States not long after the final shock waves of the Tet Offensive had broken and receded away.

Most of the soldiers going back had just come through six weeks of hard fighting, in which they had administered a severe beating to the NVA and the VC—or so they thought.

When they returned home, they were told in no uncertain terms that it was they who had been severely beaten.

How did that happen? How did the American public get such a skewed view of the Tet Offensive? This was, after all, the world's first "prime-time war." And the television camera never blinks—or does it?

In his analysis of the Vietnam War, *On Strategy*, Colonel Harry G. Summers Jr. maintains that the TV camera is a most unsuitable journalistic device for covering a war. The camera, he notes, loves action. It's great for capturing all the action and sensationalism of a firefight, but worthless for showing the hours or even days of dull grinding tedium leading up to the action.

The result is a highly selective sample of what any war is really like. Yet, TV viewers form their opinions from those samples, fed to them in 15-and 30-second capsules on the evening news. Such images cater to short attention spans, but can distort perspective.

Perhaps the best example was the fight for the U.S. Embassy in Saigon. As a military target, the embassy was utterly insignificant. The fight there had absolutely no influence on the overall military situation. One U.S. officer later described it as "a piddling platoon action." But to the American viewers of the six o'clock news who saw the final stages of the fight in living color, it seemed a military disaster second only to Pearl Harbor.

Another problem was the way the Tet Offensive was perceived by the journalists themselves. Instead of their periodically going out to the war from a safe and comfortable base in Saigon, the war, for the first time, came to them.

General Bruce Clarke later summed it all up when he said that the enemy "took the battle down around the Caravelle Hotel and so, from the standpoint of the average reporter over there, it was the acorn that fell on the chicken's head, and it said, 'the sky is falling'."

An ARVN soldier advances through the rubble of Cholon, the Chinese quarter of Saigon and scene of some of the most intense street fighting. The ARVN bent but did not break during the offensive.

APCs. As the relief column rolled out of the city toward the air base, the squadron commander, Lt. Col. Hugh J. Bartley, spotted another large ambush from his command-and-control helicopter. At Bartley's direction, the column detoured around the ambush site, firing into the ambushers' rear as it went.

Troop A reached the air base and linked up with the 101st Airborne Division's 2nd Battalion, 506th Infantry, which had been brought in by helicopter at dawn. Together they ejected the attackers from the eastern end of the field. The fight took most of the day. Troop A lost two more APCs. Its lone tank took 19 hits and lost two crews, but was still operational when the battle was over.

The fight for Long Binh-Bien Hoa ended on the evening of February 1 with the arrival of the 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment, after an eight-hour forced march from War Zone C. The 2nd of the 47th Infantry and Troop A of the 3rd of the 5th Cavalry were later awarded Valorous Unit Citations.

The teeming Chinese section of Cholon, in the southwest corner of Saigon, was the Communists' key population objective inside the Saigon Circle. Initially, the area was attacked by the 5th and 6th VC Local Force Battalions. As the fighting dragged on into days—and then into weeks—elements of every Communist unit known to be operating in Saigon were eventually identified there.

The key to Cholon was the Phu Tho Racetrack. It was at the hub of most of the key streets in the area and, by holding it, the VC could deny its use as a landing zone. Early on the thirty-first, General Weyand ordered Brig. Gen. Robert C. Forbes, commanding general of the 199th Light Infantry Brigade, to send some of his troops to reinforce ARVN rangers in Cholon. The elements from the 199th had to be shifted from their defensive positions at Long Binh, making the huge logistics complex just that much more vulnerable.

The 6th VC LF Battalion had little trouble taking the racetrack. From there, a large number of Communist political cadres fanned out to work through the huge urban sprawl. Some tried to whip up support for the General Uprising. Others went to serve arrest and execution warrants on government figures and ARVN officers in the area. A month-long reign of terror in Cholon had begun.

Company A, 3rd Battalion, 7th Infantry, and the 199th's reconnaissance troop reached Cholon about 8 a.m. that morning (January 31). Six blocks from the racetrack, an RPG hit the lead APC in the column, killing the platoon leader. Communist troops began to fire down onto the column from the surrounding buildings. The infantry dismounted and continued fighting house to house, exactly as their colleagues in the 2nd Squadron of the 47th were doing in Bien Hoa at that very moment.

By 1 p.m. Company A had pushed to within two blocks of the racetrack. The VC then withdrew to prepared positions behind the concrete benches at the track. Company A assaulted the position, but was repulsed. At 4:30 it tried again, this time supported by helicopter gunships. The Americans succeeded in taking the track, but the VC troops melted away into the streets of Cholon. Shortly after dark, Companies B and C of the 3rd of the 7th were brought onto the racetrack by helicopter.

The next morning, the troops at the racetrack were reinforced by two mechanized companies (B and C) of the 9th Division's 2nd Battalion, 60th Infantry, and the 33rd ARVN Ranger Battalion. Using the racetrack as a base of operations, they started working outward to clear Cholon. The VC tried to retake the racetrack later that day, but were beaten back.

The tedious city fighting ground on. By February 3, the South Vietnamese had five ranger, five marine and five airborne battalions inside Saigon. The Americans had committed seven infantry, one MP and six artillery battalions. On February 5, the ARVN 5th Ranger Group started an opera-

South Vietnamese M41 Walker Bulldog light tanks stand guard as life in Cholon returns—relatively—to normal. The Communists' hoped-for General Uprising has failed, but their having carried the fight into the capital has left an indelible mark.

tion to finally clear Cholon. For political and prestige reasons, the South Vietnamese JGS requested that the Americans pull out of Cholon and allow the ARVN to finish the job. By the 10th of February, they were requesting that the 3rd of the 7th be sent back in. Later, the 3rd of the 7th Infantry was also awarded the Valorous Unit Citation for its fight in Cholon.

Hue was retaken on February 25. Cholon was finally cleared on March 7. Hoping to save some face, the Communists stepped up their pressure on Khe Sanh, but in a traditional set-piece battle like that, they had no reasonable expectation of overcoming American firepower and air superiority.

About March 20, the NVA units around Khe Sanh began to melt away. On April 1, Operation PEGASUS, the ground relief of Khe Sanh, was launched. Enemy opposition was light. A few weeks later, Colonel Tran Van Dac, the chief VC political officer for Saigon, defected. The Tet Offensive was over.

Militarily, the Tet Offensive had been a tactical disaster for the Communist forces. By the end of March, they had not achieved a single one of their objectives. More than 58,000 VC and NVA troops died in the process, as opposed to just under 4,000 U.S. and 5,000 ARVN deaths.

By attacking everywhere at once, Giap had superior strength nowhere. He achieved great surprise, but he was unable to exploit it. Analyzing the battle for the Saigon Circle, General Weyand later concluded that it had actually been a large collection of relatively small independent actions. The assault had been launched piecemeal, and it was repulsed piecemeal.

Giap had been dead wrong in two key assumptions. The people of the South did not rally to the Communist cause. The General Uprising never took place—even in Hue, where Communist forces held an entire city for the longest time. Nor did the ARVN fold. It may have buckled in a few areas, but by and large, it fought, and fought amazingly well.

If there was a single big loser in the Tet Offensive, it was the Viet Cong. The guerrillas of the South led the main attacks, and they suffered the heaviest casualties. The guerrilla infrastructure, so carefully developed over many years, had been destroyed with a single throw of the dice. From that point on, the Second Indochina War was entirely run by the North. The VC were never again a significant force on the battlefield. When Saigon fell in 1975, it was at the hands of four NVA corps.

And yet, Giap was quite correct in his third assumption—about the will of his enemy. With one hand, the United States gave Giap his greatest tactical defeat, and with the other hand gave him his greatest strategic victory, making the Tet Offensive one of the most paradoxical of the world's decisive battles.

The American military had been caught by surprise but still won. The generals instinctively knew the enemy was on the ropes, and now was the time to finish him off. Westmoreland and JCS Chairman Wheeler put together a plan requiring an additional 206,000 American troops to exploit the enemy's debacle, but the Johnson White House leaked the plan to the press. The story broke on March 10, 1968. The American public concluded the extra troops were needed to recover from a massive defeat, with accusations that it had been lied to by the government. It was a psychological turning point. Less than three weeks later, President Johnson announced that he would not seek re-election. As the American military historian Brig. Gen. S.L.A. Marshall summed up later, the 1968 Tet Offensive was "a potential major victory turned into a disastrous retreat through mistaken estimates, loss of nerve, bad advice, failure in leadership, and a tidal wave of defeatism." □

Vietnam veteran David T. Zabecki was there, in uniform and battle gear, for the Tet Offensive. As further reading, please try Tet *by Don Oberdorfer;* The Big Story *by Peter Braestrup;* On Strategy *by Colonel Harry G. Summers Jr.*

WITH THE WALKING DEAD

A "patrol" along the "Street Without Joy" for a young Marine would be more than that. . . it would be a metamorphosis.

Interview by Albert Hemingway

In mid-December of 1966 in South Vietnam, sharp fighting erupted in the Co Bi-Thanh Sector in Thua Thien Province, 13 miles northwest of the ancient capital city of Hue. The enemy attacked several vital installations that included the Phong Dien District Headquarters and the An Lao Bridge spanning the Bo River.

With intelligence reporting the 6th NVA (North Vietnamese Army) Regiment moving toward the coast, Maj. Gen. Wood B. Kyle, Commanding General, 3rd Marine Division, sent the 3rd Battalion, 26th Marines, with an attached artillery battery, into the area. By Christmas, the operation, dubbed CHINOOK, was expanded and the 2nd Battalion, 26th Marines, was also ordered into the fray. The Leathernecks were to block infiltration routes emanating from the mountains and prevent the Viet Cong from occupying the all-important farming region with its abundant rice crop.

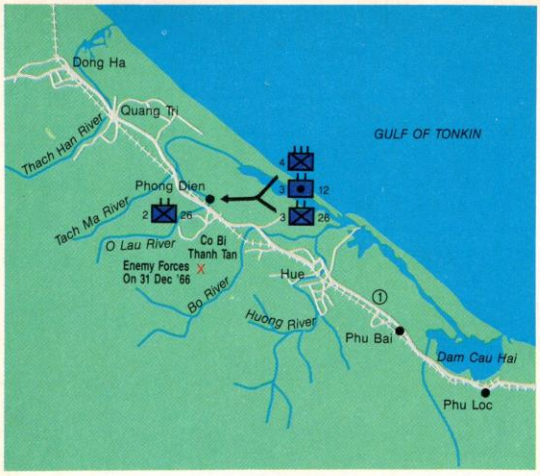
By February of 1967, with additional NVA units invading the northern I Corps in greater numbers, Kyle decided to shuffle his forces and dispatched Major James L. Day's 1st Battalion, 9th Marines, ominously referred to as the "Walking Dead," into the rice-rich sector and renamed the operation CHINOOK II. Included in the battalion's TAOR (Tactical Area of Responsibility) was "*La Rue Sans Joie*," the "Street Without Joy," that road artery through time that always was a hotbed of Communist activity.

Russell Loller, a resident of New Haven, Conn. and a successful businessman, participated in CHINOOK II as a member of Company C, 1st Battalion, 9th Marines. Since he had been "in country" for less than a week, it would be his first combat operation.

Hemingway: When did you join the 1/9?

Loller: After checking in at Da Nang and being processed, I flew up to Phu Bai Combat Base on a C-130. Phu Bai was nothing like I expected. It was just a big dirtball. I was assigned to Charlie Company as they were preparing to depart

A patrol of the 2nd Battalion, 9th Marines—"The Walking Dead"—travel along a dirt road near the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) in August 1967. While guerrilla war seethed in the south, the DMZ was the scene of frequent encounters between two forces of hard-core professionals: the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) and the United States Marine Corps.



TOP: Operation CHINOOK was an effort by the Marines to block NVA infiltration routes in December 1966. As more NVA units entered the I Corps area in February 1967, the 1st Battalion, 9th Marines, were moved in to reinforce the follow-up, CHINOOK II. ABOVE: Fire support is provided by a 105mm howitzer of 1st Battalion, 26th Marines, southeast of Saigon during Operation DECKHOUSE III, August 1966. The unit later assisted the CHINOOK operations in the north.

for CHINOOK II. There were four or five of us, and everything was a big rush. In my squad I was the automatic rifleman and carried the M-14. My squad leader was a corporal, and we had fire-team leaders who were PFCs. That was one of the first things I noticed when I got there. It was quite a bit different from stateside training.

Hemingway: How were you treated?

Loller: I have to say they really watched over me. Everyone seemed truly concerned.

Hemingway: What was your squad like?

Loller: Really great! However, I can't remember their names—just nicknames. For instance, Igor, our M-79 grenadier, could hit anything. He never used the sights. Bagley, I'm pretty sure that was his name, was our 3.5-rocket man. I watched him place round after round with tremendous accuracy. Also, Baby Huey, probably the biggest person I ever saw in my life. The M-14 looked like a corkgun in his hands.

Hemingway: How long did you stay at Phu Bai?

Loller: Just one night. The next day at the crack of dawn we boarded helicopters and flew out to the field and landed in the middle of nowhere. I had no idea where we were. Nobody informed me we were going on a major operation. That was the biggest thing that angered me when I look back upon my time in Vietnam. They told us as little as possible. As a matter of fact, I never knew the name of the operation until it was over!

Hemingway: What next?

Loller: We took enough supplies for three days. In addition to my own gear, I "humped" extra mortar rounds, machine-gun belts, blooper [M-79] rounds, and LAAWs [light, shoulder-fired assault weapons]. I never felt anything so heavy on my back in my life. We began patrolling and discovered some hidden bunkers filled with cases and cases of RPG [rocket propelled grenades] and mortar rounds. We uncovered a few weapons, but I never was fortunate enough to snag a souvenir. The combat engineers arrived and blew the place sky high. The ground shook from the explosion.

Hemingway: When did you make contact with the enemy?

Loller: It was the second or third day. Our squad was patrolling a few "clicks" [kilometers] from our CP [Command Post]. I remember walking in a rice paddy, and to our left was a small village. It was the first one I had seen since arriving in Vietnam. The next thing I heard was "zing! zing! zing!" Somebody grabbed me and hurled me to the ground. At first, I was angry and wet—then I was told we were under fire from the ville. "The AK-47 has an unmistakable sound," Clint Eastwood said in that movie about Heartbreak Ridge. You know, he was right. I never forgot that sound.

Hemingway: Anybody wounded?

Loller: Surprisingly, no. You could actually see the white puffs of smoke coming from one of the hootches. It was mass confusion. Our squad leader was screaming orders to everybody. Our fire team laid down cover fire as another one raced across the rice paddy to assault the ville. I stood up and fired my M-14 on full automatic, and it knocked me right on my butt! I wasn't ready for it. I tried to pull a "John Wayne" and paid for it. Someone shouted: "Try to get the bullets in the village, Loller, don't shoot any birds." I was embarrassed. Next we hear, "Whump! whump! whump! INCOMING!" There were explosions all around us sending up geysers of water. I later learned they were pelting us with 60mm mortars—our own ammunition! But somehow, amid all the confusion, things got accomplished. Bagley let loose a couple of rockets and hit the hootch. I heard a woman scream and kids cry. Then there was complete silence. This all took place within a five- or six-minute time span, but it seemed like hours. It was my introduction to war.

Hemingway: Were there civilian casualties?

Credited with wiping out an enemy platoon and downing two helicopters, NVA "Platoon No. 1" in the Quang Tri-Thua Thien area typified the caliber of the Marines' opponents in the I Corps sector during the CHINOOK operations and after.

Loller: No, in spite of all the firing, not one person was injured. They fled, and we went on our merry way.

Hemingway: You were pretty lucky.

Loller: Yes, on another patrol we took some sporadic sniper fire from a tree line. We opened up with everything we had. Our machine-gunner sprayed the area, and I can remember branches and twigs snapping off and flying in the air. Again, it just stopped. One Marine suffered a leg wound but nothing serious. Miraculously, no one was killed.

Hemingway: When did you face the NVA on CHINOOK II?

Loller: Up until this point it was the Viet Cong—the guys in black pajamas. It was extremely frustrating. They were playing a "cat and mouse game" with us. Then we were ordered to go on a sweep of the "Street Without Joy" area with Alpha Company. Delta Company stayed in the rear as perimeter security. Charlie Company was on line and sloshing through marshy terrain, not rice paddies, but swamp-like ground. It was awful. I was covered with leeches. As we made our way through this brackish water, I saw a photographer on the road above us. I wondered how he got there. He snapped my picture and smiled. I said, "Where are we?" He replied, "The 'Street Without Joy.' " I remember saying something like, "Is that good or bad?" He just shook his head and gave me the thumbs-down sign.

Hemingway: He was right. The French fought a Viet Minh regiment there and took quite a few casualties.

Loller: That's correct. They told us some real horror stories about the place afterwards. Anyway. . .there was an embankment about three feet in height which ran parallel to the water. We climbed this and began walking down a hard-packed dirt road. This was the "Street Without Joy." Then all of a sudden a village seemed to materialize out of nowhere.

Hemingway: How big?

Loller: It was quite large compared to the others I had seen. They did tell us this was an agricultural site. Just about every building was constructed from cement instead of the usual grass huts. The first thing I saw was a wooden archway with the village's name written on a sign hanging from it: Ap Trung Kieu. The reason I remember the name is it's written on the back of the photograph taken by that combat photographer. However, we didn't enter through the archway—we dispersed and came into the village from the sides. One thing that really hampered our progress was the hedgerows that completely encompassed the ville. They were approximately eight to ten feet tall and obstructed our view. With the exception of a few breaks here and there, it was virtually impossible to see through them. Our platoon moved single file down a path that was just wide enough for an oxcart, with thick hedgerows on the left and a large stone wall on the right. It was evident the village had been here for quite some time and had been carefully planned and laid out. It was dead quiet. No noise. Then I suddenly realized there were no people—no animals to speak of—no nothing! If this was a farming region, where were the farmers? It was perfect for an ambush.

Hemingway: This aroused your suspicion?

Loller: Of course! How can this village, that was obviously inhabited due to the well-kept yards and streets, be completely abandoned? Then I recalled smelling a distinctive odor which later turned out to be opium. The NVA would smoke it to ready themselves for battle. Chills ran up and down my spine. I had an eerie feeling. A Marine walking next to me whispered, "I don't like this." Without warning, I heard a voice shout something in Vietnamese and a loud explosion. Again, because of these dense hedgerows you couldn't see anything. What happened was an NVA soldier walked right out and handed a Chicom [Chinese hand grenade] to our point man. He said something to him like, "Merry Christmas, Marine!" or words to that effect. It had the word Marine in it, I'm positive of that. They knew who we were.

TOP: "Where are we?" asked Private Russell Loller as a photographer snapped his picture at the head of a column of Charlie Company, 1st Battalion, 9th Marines, sloshing toward "La Rue Sans Joie" on February 20, 1967. Some hours later, the NVA sprung their trap at Ap Trung Kieu. ABOVE: Like the Viet Cong, the NVA were masters at ambush and concealment and were extremely difficult to detect. One Marine remedy was "reconnaissance by fire"—laying down fire on suspected positions to see if it would draw a response.

Hemingway: What happened then?

Loller: All hell broke loose. From then on we were pinned down and scrambling for cover. It was difficult to maneuver because of the thick brush. Because of the configuration of the village, we had to move by columns instead of our original sweep and were strung out along these narrow paths. They let us enter and closed the door, thus springing their trap. They had us surrounded and hit us with everything in their arsenal—RPGs, mortars, automatic weapons and even 75mm recoilless rifles. Everywhere you went you had to keep low or they'd pick you off. After the initial shock, we started to reorganize and fight back. Igor spotted one NVA soldier running across an open field and hit him square in the back with a "blooper" round.

Hemingway: Did the NVA have fortifications?

Loller: Not really, they just utilized the buildings and natural surroundings which, as I stated before, were perfect for an ambush. They had dug some trenches, and spider traps were everywhere. They had excellent fields of fire. I remained with three or four other Marines from my squad, and we couldn't observe anything because of those damn hedgerows.

Hemingway: Did you receive air and artillery support?

Loller: Yes, but we were so intertwined you had to be extremely cautious where you called it in. There was one incident I recall quite vividly. One of our jets, I think it was an A-6, dropped several bombs real close to our lines. Some of the NVA had taken refuge in a tree line, and we were taking some heavy fire from it. They radioed for an air strike, and after a few minutes someone yelled, "Here it comes, keep your heads down." I looked to my rear and saw the plane drop its load behind us and then roar overhead and peel off. That's one of the worst feelings in the world to look up and see two 500-pound bombs tumble over you. I felt as if I could reach up and grab them. They were right on target, though, and blew that tree line to kingdom come! As far as artillery, it was only used in those sections of the village that were not occupied by us.

Hemingway: Did they try to infiltrate at night?

Loller: No, for some strange reason they left us alone. There was some occasional firing, but we kept flares up all night illuminating the landscape.

Hemingway: That is strange.

Loller: Yes, it was. You remember the old saying, "The night belongs to Charlie?"

Hemingway: I sure do.

Loller: We did send out several "kill teams," but they never made any contact. I can only guess they [the NVA] felt the same way we did—fight all day and rest at night.

Hemingway: Did the "choppers" take heavy ground fire?

Loller: They sure did. However, there was really no place for them to land. The door gunners would kick supplies out to us and get away as fast as they could. I watched two or three of the "birds" go down. The dead and wounded couldn't be evacuated, and some of our Marines were in tough shape. Not having enough water was the worst part. We had to ration it out. All you received was half a canteen cup—not one drop more. It was like gold. We ran out of C-rations quickly and supplemented our diet with grapefruit. A couple of Marines managed to crawl and pick some of them off the trees. The skin on them had to be an inch-and-a-half thick and after you peeled it you would end up with something the size of a golf ball. They had very little juice, but were meaty and sweet. They contained just enough moisture to keep us going. The oranges were awful, so we avoided them. I saw Marines so desperate they would fill their canteens from mud puddles and rice paddies and get really sick. There was no rain, and it was a real scorcher.

Hemingway: No Halazone tablets?

Loller: Didn't have any. By the time they reached us, it

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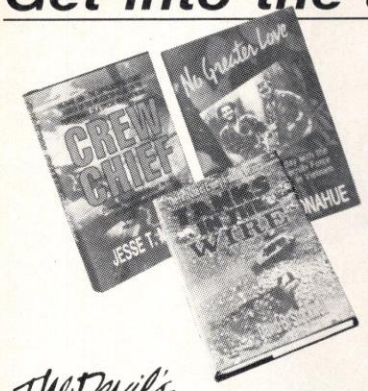

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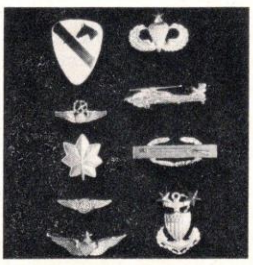

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Marines under fire cut loose with their Stoner carbines during the February 1967 sweep. Light and handy, the Stoner required too much care and maintenance in the field to be a successful weapon.

was too late. Practically everybody had dysentery. A few months later, I wound up in the hospital with a stomach infection and a 104-degree fever. You don't understand how important a simple glass of water can be. For example, several years ago, someone remarked to me, "I haven't eaten all day, I'm starving." I thought to myself, you don't know what it's like buddy. Try to go without food and very little water for days at a time in 100-degree-plus heat. We take so many things for granted.

Hemingway: Did you sustain many casualties?

Loller: All I can remember is approximately 30 or 40 members of the company walking away from it without a scratch. The rest were dead, seriously wounded or walking wounded. I took some shrapnel in the leg, but nothing serious. Our platoon commander, a lieutenant, was hit by a sniper in the back of the head and killed instantly. He was a decent guy. Our machine-gunner was so upset he strolled right up to that spider hole the sniper was hiding in and let loose with an entire belt of ammunition. Losing our platoon commander was a tragic loss. I can honestly say the majority of our officers were good people.

Hemingway: What was the size of the NVA unit you were facing?

Loller: I'm not sure. It could have been a battalion—at least, that's what I heard. But they really kicked the hell out of us. It's funny, but during my 13-month tour in Vietnam, this would be the only time I saw this many NVA together in one place. The basic Marine infantry unit, until then, was accustomed to hit-and-run tactics. Now our battalion comes along, with very little in the way of provisions, and runs head-on into a hard-core NVA outfit. We didn't expect this to happen. We didn't even have our packs with us—just ammunition. We were totally unprepared. Compared to my first day of combat, this was absolute insanity.

Hemingway: What was the terrain like?

Loller: The area surrounding the "Street Without Joy" was relatively flat, and it was easy to dig in because the ground was similar to beach sand. Also, I remember cemeteries with numerous mounds, both large and small. It seems the Vietnamese buried their dead sitting up.

Hemingway: You hadn't received the M-16 rifle on CHINOOK II?

Loller: No, I wasn't issued mine until I was assigned to Cam Lo, farther north. The weapon did have certain advantages. It was lighter and you could carry more ammunition. I didn't particularly care for the way we were introduced to it. They took us out in the field near Dong Ha (3rd Marine Division Headquarters) and gave us one magazine to fire. You cut loose with 20 rounds, and that was your training with the M-16.

Hemingway: Did it ever jam on you?

Loller: I never had a problem. We heard the Marines on Hill 881 and Khe Sanh had difficulties with it. The reason was they were trying to take care of the M-16 like the M-14. The M-14 could be thrown in mud, pulled out a week later, and operated. It was fantastic—really durable.

Hemingway: Getting back to CHINOOK II, did any Vietnamese scouts accompany you on the operation?

Loller: You mean the "*Chieu Hoi's*" (Open Arms)? Yes, they did. They were NVA or VC that had defected to our side. We called them "Kit Carson" scouts. The one we had with Charlie 1/9 wasn't bad, but the majority of them I didn't trust. I believe in war there are certain things you can do to obtain information from prisoners, short of torture. However, these guys were brutal. I remember, after I left 1/9 and joined another unit, hearing screams coming from the interrogation room.

Hemingway: What unit were you transferred to?

An NVA attack at its most effective hit hard and got away fast, knowing that massive reactive firepower would soon be brought to bear. Here, a Marine A-6A Intruder leads A-4 Skyhawks on an air strike.

Loller: Lima Company, 3rd Battalion, 3rd Marines.

Hemingway: Did anyone from your outfit participate in torture?

Loller: I don't believe so. The only thing I can recall getting angry about was questioning the young males in the villages. There's no way they could be farmers and not doing something at night with the local VC militia. The South Vietnamese government was drafting all available able-bodied men for the ARVNs (Army of the Republic of South Vietnam) and hauling them away in trucks. If any of them gave us a hard time, somebody would let them have it with a buttstroke across the jaw.

Hemingway: What was the final outcome at the "Street Without Joy?"

Loller: Delta Company broke through and reinforced us, and it just stopped. That was the trademark of the NVA, they would engage you as long as possible and inflict as many casualties as they could. When it appeared as if they might lose, they pulled back.

Hemingway: How much longer did you remain with 1/9 after that?

Loller: Maybe two or three months. We received replacements and continued with CHINOOK II. We captured a large cache of rice on one patrol—50 tons to be exact. They had hootches filled with the stuff. We took it out by choppers to feed some refugees. Someone said, "Charlie's going to go hungry for a while." But time escapes me after "Street Without Joy." For some reason, something inside me snapped. I became an introvert. I stopped talking to people and making friends. I shunned everyone. It really bothered me. The one thing that sticks in my mind is seeing all those bodies lined up. It made me sick. Marines you were laughing and joking with the day before were now gone forever. It hit me hard. However, I want to point out, I'm not a deranged killer or drug addict. That's a myth Hollywood and the media have kept alive through the years. Most Vietnam vets have returned and been quite successful, at least the ones I know.

Hemingway: Despite the hardships, there were always humorous incidents. Remember any?

Loller: There's always funny things happening. Like the time on CHINOOK II when I killed a tree. It was at night, and it appeared as if someone was getting ready to toss a grenade into our hole—so I threw mine first. The branches of the tree were swaying, and I mistook them for arms. Also on CHINOOK II, before the "Street Without Joy," we were crossing a stream when all of a sudden our radio operator starts hollering: "Something's got my leg! I think it's a snake!" He fell in the water and began thrashing about and screaming at the top of his lungs. We pulled him out, trying to keep the radio dry. What had happened was the handset he had clipped to his shirt fell off, and the cord wrapped around his leg. It felt like a snake to him.

Hemingway: There was always something to laugh about.

Loller: Yeah, you had to laugh or you'd never make it. It's a wonder any of us made it anyway.

Hemingway: It has been 20 years since CHINOOK II and "Street Without Joy." When you think back, what are your feelings?

Loller: I was changed from it, there's no doubt about that. I emerged from this terrible ordeal a different person. I was a hardened veteran at 18 years of age. Anyone who experiences combat undergoes a metamorphosis. You lose your innocence. . . . I'll never forget it. □

Interviewer Al Hemingway also served with the U.S. Marine Corps in Vietnam. Further readings: Street Without Joy *by Bernard B. Fall;* U.S. Marines in Vietnam, Fighting the North Vietnamese, 1967, *by Gary L. Telfer, Lane Rogers, Keith V. Fleming.*

BRIDGE AT DRAGON'S JAW

In 1965, few would have guessed that the large bridge listed as No. 14 on the American target list for air strikes would prove the toughest and most costly of all targets in undeveloped North Vietnam.

By Sam McGowan

With few real military targets available for destruction in rustic-seeming North Vietnam, American planners needed only one look in the mid-sixties to mark down the mile-long Than Hoa Bridge as one very fat target for their coming air offensive.

Seven years in the making, it was North Vietnam's longest bridge. A priority item for the Communists also, it had been dedicated personally by Ho Chi Minh. Resting on 18 concrete pilings and reinforced throughout, the massive structure spanned the Song Ma River at a point called "the Dragon's Jaw." The bridge took its name from the nearby town of Than Hoa, capital of Annam Province, south of Hanoi.

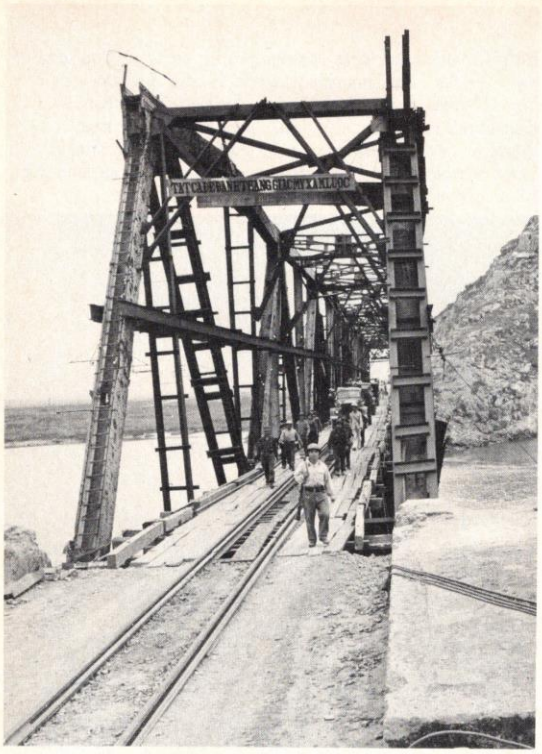
The new bridge, built with Communist Chinese aid, carried both rail and road traffic, with the rails running down the center between two ribbons of roadway. Add the viaducts leading to the span proper, and total bridge length came to more than a mile and a half.

Opened to traffic in 1964, the major structure replaced an old span destroyed during Indochina's earlier war between the Communist Viet Minh and the French. To assure the destruction of the original bridge, the Viet Minh guerrillas simply loaded two locomotives with explosives and ran them together in the middle of the bridge. Bingo! No bridge.

In 1965, America, of course, didn't have ground forces in the North that could emulate the Viet Minh feat, but they did have airpower. As they prepared to unleash their ROLLING THUNDER air offensive against the North, the Than Hoa Bridge went down on the list of 94 priority targets in the entire country as No. 14—with no one suspecting at the time that No. 14 would prove the most difficult target in North Vietnam; the most costly in terms of aircraft, weaponry and American lives.

Some target on the list naturally would be the toughest of

F-105D "Thunderchiefs" emerge from a curtain of antiaircraft fire over the Paul Doumer bridge in Hanoi. The longest in North Vietnam, the Paul Doumer bridge was temporarily neutralized on August 11, 1967, and kept under attack thereafter. A far tougher span to crack was the seemingly indestructible Than Hoa bridge over a point on the Song Ma River known as "The Dragon's Jaw."



TOP: The persistent efforts made to destroy the Than Hoa bridge and its almost supernatural ability to withstand them made it a legend in Hanoi and a bogey to the frustrated Americans. ABOVE: Lieutenant Colonel Robinson Risner, commander of the 67th Tactical Fighter Squadron, led the first raid against the bridge on April 3, 1965.

all to destroy, but surely not the inviting bridge so far from any military or urban center! Or so it seemed as ROLLING THUNDER got underway in 1965, barely a year after Ho Chi Minh's dedication of the bridge at the Dragon's Jaw.

Than Hoa was first struck by American aircraft on 3 April, 1965, after the aircraft of mission ROLLING THUNDER 9A took off from their various bases for the first of what would be numerous attacks on the one target in North Vietnam that would resist virtually all forms of assault.

The 79-airplane force consisted of 46 F-105s; 21 F-100s; two RF-101s and 10 KC-135 tankers. The F-100s came out of bases in South Vietnam, and the remainder of the force came from Thailand. Sixteen of the 46 F-105s—which came to be known as "Thuds," because that was the sound they made impacting on the ridges of North Vietnam—were loaded with Bullpup missiles, and the remainder each carried eight 750-pound bombs.

All the missile carriers, as well as half the bomb-laden F-105 "Thunderchiefs," would strike the bridge. The remainder would act as flak suppressors, along with seven of the F-100 "Supersabres." Four F-100s would provide MIGCAP, to protect against enemy air attack, while eight would fly RESCAP, to cover any rescue attempt that might be needed.

Each of the F-100s carried 2.75mm rockets, while the flak suppression F-100s also carried two 750-pound bombs "for good measure." The MIGCAP aircraft were armed with Sidewinder missiles, while two F-100 weather-reconnaissance aircraft were armed only with their integral 20mm cannon.

Lieutenant Colonel Robinson Risner, who would earn the Air Force Cross and later be shot down over the North and spend years in a POW camp, led the raid. His plan called for an attack from the south, with the flak-suppression fighters going in first, followed by the strike aircraft.

The missile launchers would drop their Bullpups from 12,000 feet, while the bombers would release their 750-pounders from 4,000-6,000 feet. At the time, North Vietnamese antiaircraft was relatively light; later, an influx of Communist-made weapons would produce the most intensely concentrated antiaircraft ever experienced in warfare as North Vietnam's chief defense against American fighters.

The attack went "like clockwork," with missile after missile and bomb after bomb exploding on and around the bridge superstructure. But one pilot, Captain Bill Meyerholt, reported later that the Bullpups "seemed to bounce off" the bridge!

As the last flight of the day pulled up from its run-in, Captain Carlyle Smith looked back and saw smoke, but the bridge still stood. Antiaircraft fire had claimed two aircraft, an F-100 from the flak-suppression flight and one of the two RF-101s. Colonel Risner was hit coming off the target, but nursed his crippled "Thunderchief" into Da Nang.

Post-strike reconnaissance indicated only minor damage to the bridge and its approaches. North Vietnamese transportation was virtually unhindered, in spite of millions of U.S. dollars spent on the strike.

On the following day, the strike force went back to Than Hoa, once again led by Robbie Risner. Risner remained high to assess the damage, while Captain Smitty Harris was the first man "down the slot" to the bridge. Harris' F-105 was hit by 37mm fire as he came off the target. With his airplane on fire and beginning to self-destruct, Harris punched out, to land in the arms of some 50 to 75 armed North Vietnamese who apprehended him in a rice paddy near the bridge. He was taken prisoner and spent seven years of captivity in the "Hanoi Hilton."

Two other F-105s were shot down without reaching the target as they orbited at the IP (Initial Point) waiting for their time-over-target. Four MiG-17s rushed out of the clouds at the bomb-laden fighter-bombers in the first successful enemy air attack of the war. Ironically, the North Vietnamese

A battery of camouflaged 57mm antiaircraft guns makes its presence known to approaching American bombers. INSET: One of the AAA crews at Than Hoa. Hanoi exaggerated their bag, but it was still the highest of any one location in Vietnam.

used the same tactics taught years before to the Chinese by General Claire Chennault—make one firing pass, take out one airplane, then get out of there! Both F-105 pilots were lost.

In spite of the enemy air opposition, the strike force pressed on in its attack of the bridge, putting its bombs square on target in spite of heavy antiaircraft fire. Unfortunately, the bombs once again did little damage. Over 300 bombs were observed to strike the bridge, but the dragon still breathed fire at the puny white knights on their metal steeds! Other nearby targets were destroyed, including a power plant, and the bridge was observed to be sagging a bit, but all in all, results were much less than anticipated.

A month later, on 7 May, the F-105s returned again to Than Hoa. By this time the Communists had restored the rail service across the bridge. The strike force included missile-equipped F-4Cs to counter the MiG threat, as well as ECM aircraft to confirm and counter radar-guided antiaircraft guns thought to be in the vicinity of the bridge, in addition to enemy Ground-Controlled Intercept (GCI) sites that were thought to have directed the MiG attack on 4 April.

Twenty-eight F-105s dropped eight 750-pound bombs each on the bridge, charring and twisting the eastern span, but it still stood. One F-105 was lost to the antiaircraft fire in the vicinity of the bridge, but the pilot managed to reach the Gulf of Tonkin before abandoning his stricken Thud. Flak now reached 15,000 feet into the skies over Than Hoa.

By mid-May, only the Than Hoa Bridge still stood of 27 North Vietnamese bridges that had been attacked. Only the Dragon's Jaw had claimed American aircraft and lives. Although Bullpup missiles and 750-pound bombs had been sufficient against the French-built bridges, the "unengineered" Chinese- and Vietnamese-built bridge seemed impervious to these weapons. The double roadway and the railway had been damaged by the attacks, but were easily repaired.

Tactics were changed in the bridge attacks. Smaller attacking forces would be used, without flak suppression and MIGCAP support. The idea was to use the element of surprise to allow the fighter-bombers to get in and out before the enemy gunners could orient themselves. Newer, more powerful weapons were sent to Southeast Asia, and would be employed. On 30 May, a four-plane F-105 strike dropped thirty-two 750-pound bombs on the bridge, once again temporarily closing it to traffic, but doing little damage to the bridge itself.

As the U.S. Navy increased its air assets at "Yankee Station," the point off the North Vietnamese coast where Navy carriers maintained permanent station, that service assumed a larger burden of the air war against North Vietnam. North Vietnam was divided into six different areas, known as "Route Packages," the Air Force and Navy each being given responsibility for armed reconnaissance in one zone or another. Than Hoa lay in Route Pack IV, and was thus within the Navy's area of responsibility.

On 17 June, 1965, the Navy flew its first strike against the bridge. Navy tactics called for the use of small flights of two and four aircraft to attack the bridge, using a wide array of aircraft and weapons: A-4 Skyhawks, F-4 Phantoms, A-6 Intruders and occasionally including A-3 Skywarriors or F-8 Crusaders. Navy bombers carried bombs ranging in size from 250 to 3,000 pounds, while its missiles used warheads as large as 1,000 pounds. For three years, until the bombing halt imposed by the Johnson Administration, the Navy carried out a bombing campaign against the bridge. Between June 1965 and May 1966, the Navy hit the bridge 24 times using a total

An F-105D launches its 250-pound Bullpup air-to-ground missile at a North Vietnamese target. The Bullpup was one of many formidable weapons unleashed against the Than Hoa bridge.

of 65 airplanes, dropping more than 128 tons of ordnance on the bridge and its environs. Navy officials compared the surrounding area to the moon, there were so many craters.

As the bridge still stood and American air attacks continued, the North Vietnamese beefed up their antiaircraft activity in the vicinity. It was now obvious that other Communist nations were pouring antiaircraft weapons into North Vietnam, many of them sophisticated radar-aimed guns. The USAF designed the CBU to counter the flak threat. CBUs were cluster bombs, each containing thousands of tiny bomblets which were deadly against personnel. The use of CBUs attracted the attention of America's vociferous antiwar lobby, which claimed the weapons were used against "innocent villagers" when in fact they were used specifically against North Vietnamese gunners.

As the bombing campaign continued and the Than Hoa bridge became an increasing source of frustration for the American airmen, the Air Force began considering drastic measures to take it out. In the latter part of 1965, the Air Force Armament Development Laboratory notified the Pentagon that it had developed a concept of mass-focusing explosives. This would allow the development of weapons which could be used against especially formidable targets such as dams and bridges. The Air Force commander in Vietnam, General Joe Moore, was informed of the new weapon and its potential against bridges, especially the Than Hoa. There was a hitch with the new weapons, though. Their size ruled out delivery by fighters, or even by the bombers then in the Air Force inventory. They would have to be delivered by a cargo aircraft, specifically, a C-130.

Historically, the troop carrier mission of the United States Air Force had been one of the most hazardous missions faced by Air Force aircrews. In World War II, troop carrier crews braved intense small-arms fire and antiaircraft to drop paratroopers in advance of every major invasion in Europe. In Holland, the ill-fated effort to secure the bridge at Arnheim was kept from being a major disaster only because of the heroism of American and British transport and bomber crews who came in low and slow in the face of intense enemy fire to airdrop supplies to their paratroopers who were cut off by the heavily armed enemy.

Although Air Force troop carrier crews in the mid-Sixties lacked publicity, they were not lacking in courage—and they had an airplane that would prove to be the most versatile airplane to be used in Southeast Asia. The Lockheed C-130 was rugged, and its four engines allowed the airplane to absorb a lot of punishment—much more than a fighter, which could be brought down with a single round. The Hercules was fast for a transport, and its approach at low altitude was noiseless; those on the ground would not be aware of its presence until the airplane was directly overhead. TAC troop-carrier crews were trained in low-altitude flying and airdrop of cargo and personnel from low altitudes. The proposed use of C-130s to attack the bridge was not as far-fetched as the idea may sound to those unfamiliar with the airplane or its normal mission.

Crews from TAC's 314th Troop Carrier Wing, based at Sewart AFB, Tenn., were picked for the mission, and sent to Eglin AFB to train in delivery tactics for the new pancake-like weapons. Each weapon would weigh 5,000 pounds, was 8 feet in diameter and 2½ feet thick. A single C-130 could deliver five weapons on one pass.

General Moore felt that the use of the C-130s in a direct attack on the bridge would be risky, in view of the intense concentration of flak around the target, so a method was developed whereby the weapons would be dropped into the river upstream from the bridge—detonation would be activated by magnetic sensors.

The two TAC crews deployed to Da Nang in May 1966, arriving on 22 May. The two C-130s carried 10 of the new pancake weapons, enough for two strikes. Plans called for a single C-130 to ingress over North Vietnam at low altitude, under 500 feet. The overland portion of the route was 43 miles long—the crew would be over enemy territory at low altitude for at least 17 minutes. To create a diversion, two F-4s would drop bombs and flares ten miles south of the

DECISION TO BOMB

During the years of the Kennedy Administration, the U.S. Defense Department adopted a strategy for fighting wars in the Third World that would depend on heavy use of air power, with little reliance on ground combat troops to obtain military objectives.

The USAF's Tactical Air Command and the overseas tactical commands, United States Air Forces in Europe and Pacific Air Forces, would implement this strategy, using heavy firepower in the form of fast-moving, heavily-armed tactical fighters. Although the fighter-bombers of TAC and the overseas commands were designed for the delivery of tactical nuclear weapons, they also were well-suited for delivery of conventional weapons.

When the role of the United States in Southeast Asia moved from advisory to that of direct combat intervention, the Johnson Administration adopted its air campaign against North Vietnam in the hopes of forcing the North Vietnamese government of Ho Chi Minh to abandon plans for eventual domination of non-Communist South Vietnam. Operation ROLLING THUNDER would depend heavily on the use of Air Force and Navy fighter-bombers to destroy military targets in North Vietnam, with the sound of bombing being an indication to the Communists that, like the sound of distant thunder, the country would be in for a major storm.

Communist North Vietnam was a poor country in the early Sixties, and remains so to this day. There was little industry in the heavily agricultural economy; transportation was primitive; the nation's air force was very small, and there were only a few cities of any size—most of the population lived in rural hamlets.

In short, North Vietnam was not a country in which there was an abundance of military targets for the ROLLING THUNDER campaign to strike. The Pentagon determined that the number one priority should be trans-

bridge, while an EB-66 ECM aircraft would provide electronic countermeasures.

Major Richard Remers' crew, consisting of 1st Lieut. Thomas Turner, co-pilot; Captain Norman Clanton, navigator; 1st Lieut. Rocky Edmondson, navigator; MSgt John Shields, flight mechanic; and SSgt Aubrey Turner and A3C Johnny Benoit as loadmasters, departed Da Nang at 12:25 on the morning of 30 May and headed north for Than Hoa. This was not the first C-130 mission over North Vietnam—flareships and leaflet-drop missions had been operating there for a year—but it was the first strike mission against North Vietnam by C-130 crews. Less than an hour after take-off, Remers crossed the North Vietnamese coast, flying only 100 feet off the water, the altitude he had maintained since leaving Da Nang. He and his crew were under strict radio silence.

Two release points had been selected, one two miles from the bridge and the other only a mile upstream. Major Remers and his crew would make the final decision as to which to use.

Approaching the bridge, Remers climbed to the lofty altitude of 400 feet—more than 3,000 feet below the pull-out altitude of the fast-movers who usually attacked the bridge—and slowed to 150 knots. The co-pilot opened the aft cargo door and ramp, while the loadmasters made final preparations for the drop.

Their presence was still undetected by the enemy when they reached the first potential drop point, and so they elected to press on in closer.

Just after they passed the first release point, enemy antiaircraft fire began coming—not up, but horizontally. The enemy gunners were confused. Their fire passed several hundred feet away.

The crew dropped the C-130's five weapons, Major Remers banked his 100,000-pound "trash-hauler" to the right, then dropped back down to 100 feet for the egress out of North Vietnam. They made the coast, then headed out over the water to safety and return to Da Nang. The trash-haulers had completed their mission!

How had the stubborn bridge weathered its latest storm, though?

Bombs from A-4 "Skyhawks" from the aircraft carrier Oriskany *explode on and around the Than Hoa bridge in November 1967—in vain yet again, for all the impressive pyrotechnics.*

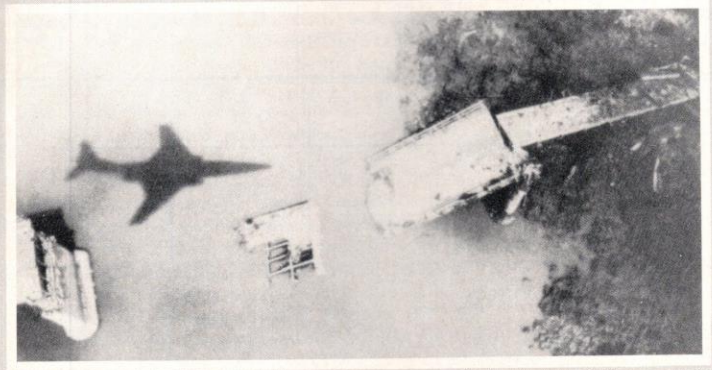
On the next day, post-strike reconnaissance photos showed that the bridge still stood—with no evidence of bomb damage visible. Major John Case's crew would try again that night. Because of his experience from the night before, Case asked navigator Edmondson to accompany his crew. They took off from Da Nang at 1:10 a.m., ten minutes late and headed north in radio silence. They were not heard from again.

Later, intelligence derived from the interrogation of a captured North Vietnamese sailor revealed that four of the five mines dropped by Major Remers' crew indeed had exploded, but with little damage done to the bridge. Later, too, Communist film footage brought out of North Vietnam by Japanese newsmen showed North Vietnamese parading parts of a C-130 through Hanoi—Case's ship?

Navy strikes against the bridge continued throughout 1966, 1967 and part of 1968. In early 1967, Navy aircraft attacked the bridge using the Walleye Glide Bomb, a free-fall glide bomb with a television camera in the nose that broadcast information back to the cockpit of the release airplane. On 12 March three A-4 Skyhawks from Attack Squadron Twelve, each with one Walleye apiece, attacked the Than Hoa Bridge. Each pilot dove at the bridge at 500 mph, the first two A-4s encountering only "light" antiaircraft, with the third pilot being greeted by heavy enemy fire. Later photographic evidence showed that all three bombs struck "within five feet of each other," but as ever the bridge remained.

The Navy continued to bomb the bridge throughout 1967, dropping approximately 215 tons of additional ordnance on it. On 28 January 1968, a joint Air Force-Navy airstrike of 44 fighters again failed to take the bridge out. That was the last strike against the bridge for some time because, a few weeks later, President Johnson halted bombing of North Vietnam north of the 19th parallel.

Four years later, in the spring of 1972, after most U.S. troops had been withdrawn from Southeast Asia, the North Vietnamese invaded South Vietnam across the DMZ and out of Cambodia



Surveying Air Force handiwork, an RF-101 casts its shadow over a fallen span of the My Duc highway bridge in North Vietnam.

portation, since the destruction of the North Vietnamese transportation system would impede the flow of supplies to the Viet Cong in the South.

A priority target area in the battle against the North Vietnamese transportation system would be the bridges that spanned the many rivers flowing out of China and through North Vietnam to the South China Sea. As a list of 94 targets was drawn up by the military planners, No. 14 was the Than Hoa Bridge, which over the next few years would prove to be the most difficult target to destroy in North Vietnam—and the most costly.

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F-4D Phantoms armed with laser-guided bombs refuel during a mission. The top aircraft carries a Paveway bomb under its right wing and a Pave Knife laser designation pod under its left. Such aircraft and weapons used by the 8th Tactical Fighter Wing finally succeeded in felling the Than Hoa bridge on May 13, 1972.

and Laos. The United States responded by sending additional Air Force units back to Southeast Asia to assist the South Vietnamese—in part by resumed bombing of the North. During the previous bombing pause the North Vietnamese had reinforced the bridge, but the USAF now had developed new weapons—"smart bombs" that could be aimed either through television or through laser guidance. These bombs were much larger than those used in the 1965-1968 bombing campaign, as heavy as 3,000 pounds.

The 8th Tactical Fighter Wing at Ubon, Thailand, was given the mission of delivering the so-called "smart weapons." All F-105s had been withdrawn from Southeast Asia after the bombing halt in 1968 and the 8th flew F-4 Phantoms. The outfit was known as the "Wolfpack" because of its success in MiG-killing during the ROLLING THUNDER Campaign.

On 27 April, 1972, 12 Phantoms took off from their base at Ubon and headed for Than Hoa. Since cloud cover over the target prevented the use of the laser-guided bombs, the electronics-optical weapons had to be used.

Antiaircraft was heavy, with hundreds of shells exploding in the skies. Surface-to-air missiles (SAMs) also were observed. In spite of the intense antiaircraft, none of the attacking aircraft was hit.

But once again, the bridge did not fall, although the damage was sufficient to prevent its use for vehicular traffic.

Two weeks later, on 10 May, Operation LINEBACKER I was initiated, allowing strike aircraft to hit Northern targets previously declared off-limits. On 13 May, Than Hoa was again a target for the men of the 8th.

Weather conditions were good, and the strike aircraft unleashed a thunderous volley of laser-guided bombs on the bridge. And at last. . .this time the bridge was knocked right off its abutments. At long last, the target that had been such a thorn in the side of American airmen flying over North Vietnam was down!

With their vaunted bridge finally put out of action, North Vietnamese repair teams worked to restore it, while also installing a temporary pontoon bridge nearby. Frequent airstrikes were flown against Than Hoa until the 23 October halting of airstrikes against North Vietnam.

When the famous LINEBACKER II campaign began in December 1972, the Than Hoa Bridge was not yet on the target list—it still was in the process of being repaired.

Called the "Christmas Bombings," it involved an intensive 11-day air campaign. Seven hundred B-52 sorties were flown as well as 1,000 fighter-bomber sorties. The North Vietnamese fired more than 1,000 SAMs (surface-to-air missiles) at these attacking aircraft and also used their MiG fighter-interceptor squadrons. Eight of these MiGs were shot down, two by B-52 tail-gunners. Twenty-six U.S. aircraft were lost, including 15 B-52s. Three aircraft were downed by MiGs; the rest, including the B52s, were downed by SAMs.

A charge was made that these bombings involved the deliberate targeting of civilian areas, designed to "carpet" (completely cover) a city with bombs.

The result of LINEBACKER II was the return of the North Vietnamese to the negotiating table and the signing of the Paris Accords less than a month later. □

Vietnam USAF veteran Sam McGowan writes from a home base in Kentucky. Suggestions for further reading: The Vietnam Experience: Thunder from Above: Air War 1941-1968 *and* Rain of Fire: Air War 1969-1973 *by John Morrocco;* Air War in Vietnam *by Phil Chinnery;* The United States Air Force in Southeast Asia 1961-1963 *by Carl Berger and* Navy and Marines *by Colonel Gene Gurney, USAF (Ret.).*

MAGNIFICENT PRESSURE EXERTED

At little-known Dai Do, an outnumbered Marine battalion preserved a vital river supply line from the ravages of an NVA division.

By Michael D. Harkins

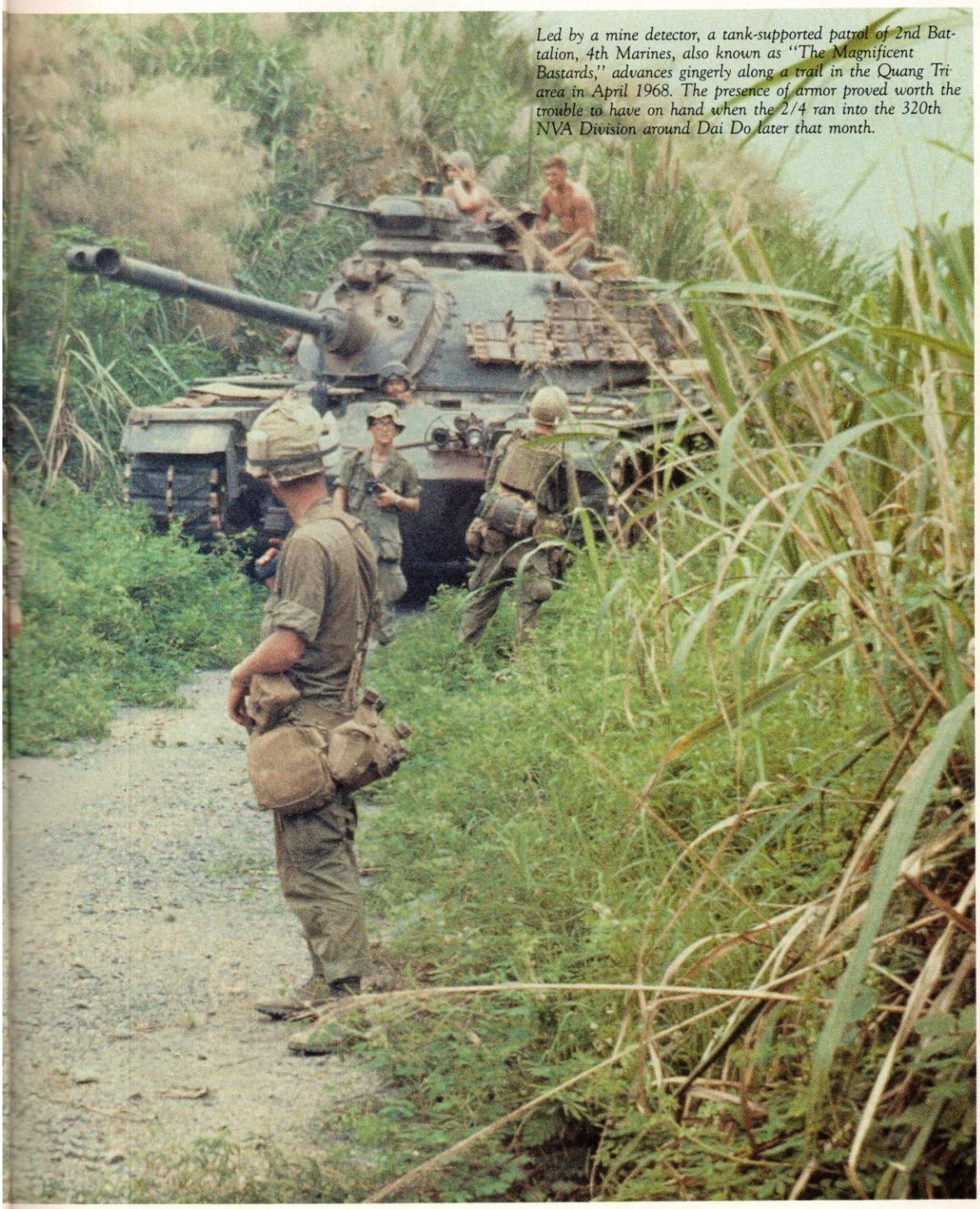
Without warning in the early morning hours of April 30, 1968, the tactical radio net of the Navy River Assault Force in northern Quang Tri Province suddenly erupted with alarming news. A Navy utility boat (LCU), traveling up the Cua Viet River, was hit by several rounds from a 75mm recoilless rifle hidden in dense vegetation on the shoreline. Sustaining serious damage, the vessel lost one sailor killed and several wounded but still managed to reach its destination under its own power.

The ambush originated from the north bank of the Bo Dieu River, a tributary of the Cua Viet, not far from the village of An Lac in Vietnam's northernmost province of Quang Tri. The 3rd Marine Division promptly closed the strategic channel to friendly traffic.

At the same time, Lt. Col. William Weise, commanding officer of the 2nd Battalion, 4th Marine Regiment, was listening from his headquarters at Mai Xa Chanh, about five kilometers to the north. A squad from one of his companies, Hotel 2/4, was in the area and began to investigate. Since Battalion Landing Team (BLT) 2/4 was under the operational control of the 3rd Marine Regiment, he relayed all available information to the 3rd Marine HQs at the mouth of the Cua Viet.

The long, winding Cua Viet River was a vital logistical link for replenishing troops fighting in the Quang Tri Province. From the Gulf of Tonkin, supplies would flow upriver to the Bo Dieu River and finally to the Navy loading ramp at Dong Ha. This sprawling base camp was the supply hub for the entire 3rd Marine Division, a resource for the large enclaves of Khe Sanh, Camp Carroll, Rockpile, Con Thien and numerous fire-support bases. Any disruption of its service would have serious consequences. It was imperative to keep it open.

Since the military defeat of the Communists during the Tet Offensive early in the year, Hanoi was taking a more active role in planning strategy for future operations. "Tet cost us half our forces," Troung Nhu Tang, a founder of the National



Led by a mine detector, a tank-supported patrol of 2nd Battalion, 4th Marines, also known as "The Magnificent Bastards," advances gingerly along a trail in the Quang Tri area in April 1968. The presence of armor proved worth the trouble to have on hand when the 2/4 ran into the 320th NVA Division around Dai Do later that month.

As they come under attack, an M-60 gunner lays down return fire as his loader directs fellow Marines—and the photographer—to get their heads down. Changeable barrels allowed the M-60 a longer sustained rate of fire than its enemy counterpart, the RPD.

Liberation Front, or Viet Cong, would reveal later. "The Hanoi leadership began to move unprecedented numbers of troops into the south, giving them a new and much more dominant position in NLF deliberations."

By the end of April, thousands of NVA soldiers were filtering into South Vietnam. But, unlike the earlier Tet Offensive in January, Tet II, as the new influx was called, was conducted almost exclusively by seasoned North Vietnamese units. Just three months after their biggest campaign of the war, the Communists were poised to strike again.

Since March 5, the Marines of 2/4 had been operating in the Cua Viet area. Dubbed the "Magnificent Bastards," a name they earned for their fighting prowess in World War II, they were a tough, battle-tested outfit. During the month of April, a lull developed in the action—the Leathernecks took advantage by training in assaults on fortified positions, patrolling and marksmanship. Night ambushes became a specialty.

But the battalion was severely undermanned. The strength of the four rifle companies was down to 125 men each—about 75 less than required. In addition, due to their constant encounters with the enemy in March, the officer ranks had been reduced. In Hotel Company alone, for most of April, there was only one officer and staff NCOs were leading the platoons.

Several hours after the ambush of the LCU on April 30, Weise's battalion was ordered to eliminate the opponent threat to the vital U.S. shipping lanes. In spite of being honed into a fine fighting force, the Marines were in a precarious position. Elements of 2/4 were widely scattered: Echo Company was under 3rd Marine Divisional control at the bridge; Golf Company was situated about 10 kilometers to the north at Lam Xuan (west) and Nhi Ha, while Foxtrot Company was in reserve with two platoons at Mai Xa Chanh and another at My Loc as security. Also located at Mai Xa Chanh were BLT (Battalion Landing Team) 2/4's 88mm mortar platoon, 4.2-mortar battery from the 12th Marines, reconnaissance platoon, engineer platoon, amphibious tractor (amtrac) platoon and two M-48 tanks. Weise's 105mm howitzer battery and ONTOS platoon (lightly armored tracked vehicles) were also detached, operating with other units. The remainder of BLT 2/4, led by Major Charles W. Knapp, Battalion Executive Officer, was afloat in the South China Sea aboard ships of Amphibious Ready Group Alpha.

The only units readily available to Weise were the reserve Foxtrot Company and Hotel Company, which already had a patrol under way at the firing site. After receiving word to begin, he ordered Hotel Company, under Captain James L. Williams, to proceed to Bac Vong, one and a half kilometers north of An Lac, and prepare to clear the village and erase the threat to the river operations.

One helpful favor for the Leathernecks was the absence of any civilians to hamper their success. Since December of 1967, the shoreline inhabitants along the Bo Dieu River had been evacuated. Their small cluster of *villes*, surrounded by hedgerows, banana and palmetto trees and thick vegetation, included Thuong Do, An Lac, Dong Huan, Dinh To and Dai Do. A traditional trouble spot, the strip of villages, was in the ARVN area of operations, and the Marines were not familiar with them and the surrounding terrain. Usually, the enemy launching ambushes would "disappear" before they could be captured or killed. However, this time Weise had an eerie premonition they would not.

Moving cautiously forward, Captain Williams' Marines indeed drew intense fire from the tiny hamlets of Dong Huan, 200 meters to the south, and Dai Do, 800 meters to the southwest. From the bombardment registered upon the Leathernecks, it was evident the villages were heavily reinforced—Weise quickly realized those two positions would have to be eradicated before securing the more important An Lac. He immediately radioed Williams and informed him to alter his plans and take Dong Huan.

Advancing rapidly, Hotel Company swung north 700 meters and crossed a creek that separated Bac Vong from Dong Huan.

A North Vietnamese soldier rises to charge with a Bangalore torpedo while his comrades cover him with AK-47 and RPD automatic weapons fire. NVA regular uniforms and pith helmets were a noticeable feature of the Dai Do battle.

Meanwhile, the BLT 2/4's reconnaissance platoon, supported by the two M-48 tanks, would provide a base of fire, as the Hotel Marines were forced to negotiate open ground in advancing the last 700 meters toward the village.

Simultaneously, two platoons from Fox Company would move across the stream on amtracs, creating a diversion and protecting Williams' right flank and rear.

As the infantrymen crawled forward, Williams lay down a smokescreen concealing his movements while a tremendous cacophony of naval gunfire, artillery tank and machine-gun fire kept the enemy at bay. As the last rounds slammed into the ville, the assault squads rushed forward into the fortifications. During the ensuing action, Captain Williams was wounded in the hip by a Chinese Communist (ChiCom) grenade. As he lay on the ground regaining his composure, a second one rolled toward him. Terrified, he waited for the inevitable explosion. It never came. The grenade was a dud.

Unholstering his .45-caliber pistol, Williams drilled the NVA soldier who was responsible, as he popped from his "spider hole." With Williams too weak to continue, command of the company was passed to 1st Lt. Alexander "Scotty" Prescott. For his outstanding leadership in the initial stages of the battle, Williams would be awarded his second Silver Star earned in Vietnam.

From his forward Command Post (CP) aboard an LCM-6 "Monitor" of the River Assault Group, Weise had witnessed Hotel Company's attack. It was "a masterpiece," he thought to himself. Their opponents taken completely by surprise, the Leathernecks stormed Dong Huan from the rear and pushed the NVA toward the Cua Viet River. For the next two hours, well-trained fire teams then eliminated fortified bunkers, spider holes and trenches manned by a tenacious enemy.

Assured that Dong Huan was in his hands, Weise next sent Foxtrot Company to invade Dai Do. Reinforced by two 106mm recoilless rifles mounted atop amtracs and anchored by sandbags, the infantrymen surged ahead. The Marines were instantly met with a fusillade of heavy artillery and small-arms fire. One platoon managed to gain entry into the eastern edge of the village but was then stopped as the enemy pounded its position. Both units consolidated their newly won locations, while a cannonade from the 12th Marines and gunfire from ships offshore, under the guidance of Lieutenant (jg) Joseph Carroll, USNR, kept the North Vietnamese from launching any counterattacks.

It was obvious the enemy was here in greater strength than anticipated, and 2/4 had caught them unprepared. At the same time, Weise had committed all his troops with Dai Do and An Lac still in NVA hands. The good news was that Companies E and G would be released to him in light of the unfolding situation. But Echo Company, still on the bridge on Highway 1, couldn't reach him for another day and a half, and Golf Company was encountering difficulties leaving Lam Xuan (west) and Nhi Ha to the north. The 81mm-mortar crews and some supplies had been lifted by helicopter to Mai Xa Chanh, but due to savage ground assaults upon the Marines, their vulnerable "choppers" were unable to pick up the rest of the unit. The weary reinforcement personnel had no choice but to move at night so they could reach the Battalion CP the next day—all without benefit of any sleep or rest for 36 straight hours.

Understanding the predicament, Colonel Milton Hull, commanding officer of the 3rd Marines, arrived to talk to Weise. Hull wanted to keep applying the pressure. In order to do this, he released Company B, 1st Battalion, 3rd Marines, and a platoon of amtracs to the 2/4 commander so he could proceed to hit An Lac as originally planned.

First Lieutenant George C. Norris, Bravo Company commander, was briefed on the situation. His orders were simple: Seize and hold An Lac. By late afternoon on April 30 the men of B 1/3 mounted their amtracs to cross the river. Riding atop the vehicles meant exposure to enemy fire, but it was safer than traveling inside. Directly underneath the troop

Marines of BLT, 2/4, (probably Echo Company), advance during the assault on Dai Do. Two "Magnificent Bastards," Captains James E. Livingston and M. Sando Vargas, Jr., won the Medal of Honor for valor at Dai Do.

compartment were the amtracs' fuel tanks which, if ignited by a land mine, would trap everyone inside in an inferno.

With support from the boats of the River Assault Group, the amtracs lurched forward into the water and proceeded north across the Bo Dieu River. As the invading force neared the middle of the stream, the NVA let loose a broadside upon the Marines. American jets, "so low you could spit on them," according to one machine-gunner, roared overhead dropping napalm into the enemy positions.

Reaching the northern river bank, the heavily laden men scrambled ashore. Just in front of them, the entire area was alive with mortars, rockets and small-arms fire. The attack stalled, though, as the squads lost momentum and hesitated on the shoreline.

Out of nowhere, the company gunnery sergeant stepped in the open, waving a golf putter over his head in a circular motion and shouting encouragement to his men.

"OK Marines," he roared, as he pointed the club at the enemy. "Let's take this treeline!"

"It was typical Hollywood," admitted PFC Paul Roughan, "but we were never so inspired in our lives."

Spurred on by their senior NCO, B 1/3 charged pell-mell into the dense foliage. Fighting was close and costly. Within the first 15 minutes, Lieutenant Norris lay dying. The same gunnery sergeant, who moments before urged his men onward, was shot through the jaw as he cradled the officer in his arms. Although they fought bravely, the Leathernecks didn't have the numerical strength to complete the sweep through An Lac. Heavy casualties were sustained. The first half-hour alone saw 17 killed and 34 wounded. Just prior to darkness, the Marines established a perimeter for the night. Machine-gun crews stripped the .30-caliber weapons from damaged amtracs to augment their firepower.

As the last rays of daylight were swallowed up by the enveloping blackness, the screeching sounds of supporting mortar and artillery shells could be heard overhead. These concentrations were laid in front of the Marine lines to discourage any enemy attempts at infiltration.

During the night, Company F was ordered to evacuate its untenable position on the southeast edge of Dai Do and to link up with Company H at Dong Huan. With the enemy now retreating from An Lac, B 1/3 occupied the rest of that village. The fight was not yet over but, evaluating the performance of his Marines on April 30, Weise felt an immense pride. They had fought magnificently against a larger enemy force. And yet there was justifiable disappointment. He was positive he would have captured Dai Do if Companies E and G had been with him. Also, the earlier removal of his ONTOS platoon, 105mm battery and additional tanks hadn't helped the situation either. Still another problem during the day had been airpower. Despite many urgent requests, 2/4 only received one air strike all day. Nonetheless, the Marines had a foothold among the villages and Weise had his orders—attack and keep pressure on the NVA. And attack he would.

The following morning, May 1, once again saw the blistering rays of the tropical sun beat unmercifully upon the already-exhausted men. There had been no rain for some time, and the ground had been transformed into an arid desert. With the exception of the hedgerows and vegetation around the villes, the terrain was flat and open. The enemy had a clear advantage. Suddenly, the men of Hotel 2/4 observed a most unfamiliar sight. Large formations of enemy soldiers were massing for what appeared to be an imminent assault on the Marine emplacements.

At the same moment, B 1/3 also reported movement. Automatic-weapon fire from both Marine perimeters exploded, with the assailants cut to pieces in the exposed countryside. Forty to fifty Communist sappers managed to get close to Bravo Company's wire by utilizing a deep crevice as cover, but they, too, were killed. "This was a scene even Spielberg couldn't recreate for the movies," one Marine commented after it was over. Tangled masses of bodies were everywhere.

Some of the dead were tied together with wire that, when tripped, would detonate grenades they had strapped to themselves. A half-dozen unsuspecting Marines were killed in this manner, including one entire mortar team from Company B.

To everyone's relief, Golf 2/4 arrived at the Battalion CP at Mai Xa Chanh and moved down the Cua Viet River aboard armed riverboats. Weise met the company commander, Captain M. Sando Vargas, Jr., and instructed him to land around the right flank of B 1/3 and overrun Dai Do. Two A-4 Skyhawks saturated the area prior to the attack with 250- and 500-pound bombs. Huge fireballs leaped up as napalm drops softened the enemy bunkers.

With two platoons in front and one in reserve, the assault waves rushed their objective. Support fire from the Navy riverboats and 90mm cannons from the two tanks hurled round after round at the entrenched NVA. Crossing the rice paddies, the Marines ran head-on into a withering hail of fire. The fighting was furious—the company was facing some of the most cleverly concealed positions ever seen in the northern I Corps area. The bunkers were A-frame in design, constructed of concrete and heavy bamboo, 8 to 10 inches thick. Layered with rice mats, dirt and straw, they were surprisingly impervious to collapse from heavy vehicles, such as tanks. The bunkers were connected by tunnels and interlocking fields of fire that were so well-camouflaged the attacking Marines were unaware of their presence until almost on top of them.

Another obstacle encountered by the Leathernecks was the barbed wire strung around the enemy enclaves. Razor sharp, the taut metal cable would whip in every direction if cut, causing serious injury.

When the assault bogged down, Vargas, still suffering from wounds received while relocating his company to Mai Xa Chanh, led his reserve platoon forward to aid his beleaguered men. Entering the first two hedgerows, the Marines methodically began eliminating enemy strongholds. Influenced by their leader's actions, Golf Company pushed its stubbornly yielding foe all the way to the northern section of Dai Do. The intrepid Vargas killed seven North Vietnamese defending one bunker, while continually urging his unit on.

Weakened by heavy casualties, however, Golf 's attack started to sputter. The NVA counterattacked from the rear. Unable to contain the whole hamlet, Weise had his men reorganize on the eastern side. While doing so, the Marines were once again hit with two more thrusts at their perimeter. The company, starting the attack with 125 men, was now down to 60.

The two platoons of Fox Company still at Dong Huan were sent into the fray to assist their sister unit. However, as soon as those Marines reached the unobstructed approach to Dai Do, a tremendous broadside of small arms, rockets and mortars drove them back. This time Weise countered with B 1/3. Mounting amtracs, the Marines moved 500 meters in an effort to penetrate the village's southern sector and relieve the pressure on Golf Company. But they, too, were pinned down. The situation was desperate.

Throughout the night, both Marine units bracketed themselves with artillery, naval gunfire, and 4.2-inch and 81mm mortar fire to prevent "Charlie" from gaining access into their lines. At times, the projectiles impacted just 50 meters from their perimeters. Close-air support was called in and fixed-wing aircraft strafed and rocketed the fields encompassing the infantrymen. Vargas, wounded for a fourth time in three months, adamantly refused medical attention and remained with his troops.

As the evening wore on, the besieged men repulsed wave after wave of fanatical infiltration attempts. To make matters worse, the Marines had nearly depleted their small-arms ammunition even while the NVA attacks increased in severity.

Two small "otters" were loaded down with supplies for the infantry and 90mm and .50-caliber ammunition for the two tanks providing support fire a short distance from Golf Company's perimeter. One of the tanks had been immobilized by a blown track, and the other had a disabled turret.

But, to everyone's horror, the tank ammo was delivered to Vargas' men, and their precious infantry supplies went to the cumbersome vehicles.

Hearing of the mix-up, Captain Lorraine "Lang" Forehand, BLT 2/4 logistic officer, immediately impounded another otter and hastened back to Dai Do to exchange the much-needed provisions under heavy fire.

"For Forehand," Weise would later say, "the impossible was routine."

At the end of the second day, Weise's Marines were exhausted, numb with fatigue. And Weise received a distressing report from Captain Richard Murphy, Battalion Intelligence Officer—12 companies of enemy soldiers were in Dai Do! Captured prisoners from the 48th and 52nd regiments informed him the 320th NVA Division was occupying the village complex. Nevertheless, the indefatigable battalion commander decided to launch newly arrived Echo Company in a

ANOTHER TRY

Not satisfied with the drubbing endured at Dai Do, a reinforced battalion of the 320th North Vietnamese Army (NVA) attempted another strike at the Marine Combat Support Base of Dong Ha in late spring.

A routine patrol conducted by elements of the Special Landing Force (SLF) of the 2nd Battalion, 4th Marines, intercepted the enemy troops near the tiny hamlet of Nia Ha, six miles northeast of Dong Ha, on May 25, 1968.

Lieutenant Colonel Louis A. Rann, battalion commander, had dispatched Company E from the USS *Princeton*, just offshore in the South China Sea, to probe the area north of the village. But his Echo Company was pelted by mortars, rocket-propelled grenades and sniper fire from the ville. Momentarily, the unit became disoriented, but it quickly regrouped and summoned air and artillery strikes to hammer the Communist positions.

The Marines advanced rapidly as the supporting fires were lifted and discovered the NVA had hastily retreated, discarding equipment and supplies. Meanwhile, manning a defensive perimeter at Nia Ha, Rann's Marines were confronted by an enemy barrage consisting of rockets and heavy mortars. However, artillery from the 12th Marines, Hotel and Whiskey Batteries, was instrumental in defeating the enemy. The "long arms" of the 105mm howitzers and the 4.2, or "short arms," made the difference.

With the realization the NVA was here in force, Rann pulled back to Camp "Big John" (named in honor of battalion Sgt. Maj. "Big John" Malnar, killed at Dai Do, at the mouth of the Cua Viet River) to reorganize.

Bolstered by Colonel Richard B. Smith's 9th Marines and Lt. Col. James W. Marsh's 3rd Battalion, 3rd Marines, 2/4 set out again for the NVA 320th Division. During the operation, the SLF Marines were hit by a surprise ground attack by an estimated battalion of enemy soldiers. Artillery, gunships and flareships worked dangerously close to the infantrymen's locations and repelled the assault troops. The next morning 15 dead were uncovered, plus 32 assorted weapons and freshly dug graves.

Once again, 2/4 had engaged the hard core NVA and pushed them back before they could mount an offensive. The "Magnificent Bastards" had done it again. The 320th NVA Division, at least temporarily, was rendered "combat ineffective."

A well-equipped Marine enters the devastated village of Dai Do in May 1968, toting three M72 LAWs (Light Antitank Weapons) on his back, against the infrequent but reportedly very real possibility of encountering enemy tanks, as well as fortified defensive positions.

predawn attack on Dai Do and assist Golf Company.

Using screening artillery fire, Company E, under the command of Captain James E. Livingston, an officer known for his coolness under fire, successfully made its way to An Lac and set up positions. Marine snipers effectively wiped out several .50-caliber machine-gun emplacements blocking the route to the village.

At 0500 on May 2, the Leathernecks of Echo Company fixed bayonets and commenced their assault on Dai Do. Even before the Marines could reach the line of departure, the first two platoons were greeted with the same concentrated firepower as the others before them. The reserve platoon was called upon. Captain Livingston, peppered twice by grenade fragments, pressed his men to keep going. Fighting was hand to hand. White phosphorous ("Willie Peter") was thrown to blind the enemy, then a combination of grenades, flame throwers, satchel charges and LAAWs (light assault antitank weapons) were used to destroy the fortifications. Joined by Vargas' men, now breaking out of their entrapment, both Echo and Golf slugged it out for more than two hours with a superior force. In all, more than 100 mutually supporting bunkers stood in the way—and were ravaged. In the end, Dai Do was finally wrested from the enemy.

But the Marines of 2/4, in the words of Weise, had "run out of steam." He earnestly pleaded for 2/3 and 3/3 to reinforce him and form the classic "hammer and anvil" to crush the NVA's 320th Division. Unfortunately, Colonel Hull didn't have the authority to move his units without approval of the commanding general, 3rd Marine Division. The plain truth was there were not enough troops to implement such a strategy. Most infantry battalions were deployed to defend larger "Dye Marker" positions that dotted the DMZ. Weise's orders remained unchanged: 2/4 was to hold on and attack.

While Echo and Golf Companies were licking their wounds, Hotel 2/4 passed around their left flank to strike at the next hamlet: Dinh To. As they approached the latest enemy bastion, mortars, rockets and artillery rained down upon the Marines. The NVA counterattacked and quickly surrounded the infantrymen. Lieutenant "Scotty" Prescott and his Marines were barely able to fight off one sortie when their aggressors were gathering for another. All hope seemed lost.

Suddenly, the radio operator screamed: "Captain Livingston is coming! Captain Livingston is coming!"

Hearing of the Hotel Company's peril, the fearless Georgia native "saddled up his guys," all 30 of them, and dashed to Hotel's assistance. Inspired anew, Prescott's men rallied and advanced through Dinh To while pouring enfilading fire into the trench lines. As the Marine aggressiveness grew, the air was unexpectedly ripped by 12.7mm machine-gun fire—hostiles were hitting the Marine flanks. Rocket-propelled grenades also plunged into their ranks. The automatic-weapon fire was so intense, it snapped banana trees in half and literally cut down the masonry walls of a building.

The Marines refused to yield any ground. One private stood upright with a spitting machine gun as he wiped out a column of charging troops. Elsewhere, fingers were sore from pulling the pins on countless numbers of hand grenades. Livingston's cool and calm manner kept everyone from becoming disorganized as entire groups of enemy infantrymen emerged from their maze of intertwining tunnels.

But Weise knew his companies couldn't maintain their dangerously exposed positions—he told them to pull back to the relative safety of Dai Do. While doing so, however, Livingston was struck down, paralyzed, hit in the legs. The indomitable leader would not permit himself to be carried out until every man was evacuated. Disregarding his pleas to leave him, Echo Marines carried their captain out of harm's way, fighting a rear-guard action back to Dai Do. For his gallantry in combat, Livingston would receive the Medal of Honor.

By the afternoon of May 2, BLT 2/4 was nearly decimated. Major "Fritz" Warren, the operations officer, organized a provisional rifle company comprised of clerks, drivers, cooks and supply personnel, plus survivors of E and H Companies, and established a perimeter at the southern edge of Dai Do.

With their plight now fully realized up the chain of command, the embattled Leathernecks of 2/4 were receiving helpful additional air strikes and stepped-up artillery support. Also, in accordance with his scheme to keep pressure on the enemy, Colonel Hull obtained permission to use an ARVN (South Vietnamese) mechanized battalion to continue the assault on Dinh To.

The plan of attack was relatively simple. The allies would jump off moving abreast of each other. The South Vietnamese, on the left flank, were to secure Thuong Nghia, while on the right, BLT 2/4 would complete the sweep of Dinh To and proceed several hundred yards farther north and seize Thuong Do. With E and H Companies at the end of their strength, Weise had no choice but to use Golf Company with only 40 effectives. In addition, he also had to call for Fox Company. The reserve platoon had arrived from My Loc and it had the most Marines, about 80. Too weak to attack, B 1/3 remained at An Lac.

At 3 p.m., the columns proceeded, including Weise's forward CP group, toward their objectives with Vargas' Golf Company in front, spearheading the drive, and Foxtrot following behind. When arriving in the open area northwest of Dinh To, the Leathernecks were welcomed with a tremendous bombardment. Without hesitation, Weise committed his reserve unit. However, to his dismay he learned Company F was itself trapped in the fields northeast of the ville. And suddenly, an enormous barrage fell upon the Marines from the left flank. Trying to contact the ARVN battalion situated there, the 2/4 commander discovered they had turned and fled. (Later, it was learned there was strong evidence indicating the 2nd ARVN Regiment had collaborated with the

enemy.) The Marines' entire left flank was exposed. Golf Company was encircled.

Vargas' infantrymen, together with the Battalion CP group, expeditiously set up a "360," or circle, to await the hordes of North Vietnamese. Helicopter gunships feverishly worked to within 25 meters of the Marines. Supporting 105mm and 155mm shells screamed through the air almost on top of Company G's position. Naval gunfire came in the form of shell after shell in support of the Leathernecks. With shrapnel landing among the ring of defenders, everyone fought. Every radio operator was either killed or wounded as he fired his weapons between transmissions. Sergeant Major John "Big John" Malnar was killed by a rocket as he pumped away on his 12-gauge shotgun. The seemingly indestructible Captain Vargas was wounded for an incredible fifth time while directing his men but still managed to remain on his feet. Seeing Weise fall from wounds, unable to walk, the dauntless Arizonian, Vargas, ran across the fire-swept rice paddy and carried his battalion commander to safety. For his bravery, Vargas also would receive the nation's highest military decoration, the Medal of Honor.

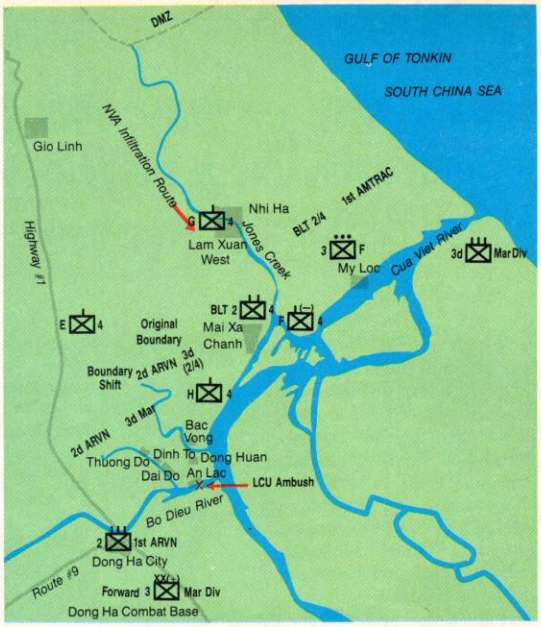
Medical personnel performed miracles, the corpsmen moving swiftly to the dying and wounded. Since the first day, the medevac "birds" had been unable to land, due to the severe rocket, mortar and artillery fire. Fearing they would lose too many of the valuable helicopters, along with their human cargo, the Marines on the ground waved them off. The wounded instead were carried to the river bank and put on "skimmer boats" to be transported to Mai Xa Chanh, a distance of nearly five kilometers. From there, they would be helilifted to hospital ships off shore.

Miraculously, the savage onslaught was held at bay as the Marines limped back to Dai Do carrying their casualties, stopping every 5 or 10 meters to lay down covering fire. In some cases, NVA soldiers were killed just five meters behind—they harassed the Marine stragglers every step of the way. In the process, any available weapon was picked up and used. First Lieutenant Judson D. Hilton, Jr., the forward air controller, found an M-79 grenade launcher and dropped its "blooper" rounds among several squads of attackers. When his ammunition was expended, he commandeered a Communist AK-47 and resumed firing. Operations Officer Warren's provisional rifle company met the survivors and assisted them back to the CP. That night, enemy activity was light around the perimeters. The most intense action was over.

The next morning, 1st Battalion, 3rd Marines, went into the hornet's nest at Dinh To-Thuong Do and found that the North Vietnamese had fled during the night. The bitter fighting for the Dai Do complex, which had started with a single incident on the Cua Viet River, was now over. Once again, the life-blood stream for all Marines operating in the northern I Corps was opened to traffic.

Had the Communist forces successfully severed the Cua Viet and its branches, the results would have been disastrous. If BLT 2/4 had failed to halt the 320th Division, the road would have been clear to Dong Ha, which was manned largely by support troops; also, 10 kilometers south of Dong Ha was the supply center at Quang Tri City. Coming on the heels of the Tet Offensive, Hanoi would have enjoyed a major propaganda victory in destroying the two largest base camps in northern I Corps.

As it was, the NVA lost at least the 1,568 troops—buried among the tiny riverside villages. A myriad of weapons was captured, including an 82mm recoilless rifle, a 75mm recoilless rifle, AK-47s, Chinese rifles, RPG launchers, mortar rounds, machine guns and Russian antitank mines. Also, two new field telephones, knapsacks filled with fresh clothing, socks, underwear, gas masks and rainsuits. The enemy had come to stay.



Less than three months after the Tet Offensive had left the Viet Cong seriously mauled, North Vietnam took charge of a less ambitious campaign to disrupt traffic along the Cua Viet River. Not for the first time, they ran afoul of the U.S. Marines in a head-on confrontation.

On the American side, more than 6,000 rounds of artillery had been spent, and a total of 27 air strikes was flown. In spite of such awesome firepower, Marine casualties were heavy: 81 killed and 297 seriously wounded—more than half the battalion.

Weise heaped praise on his men: "I was never prouder of being a Marine than I was that day. I'm sure the Lord was with us."

Likewise, he was held in high esteem by his troops. "Both Weise and Sgt. Maj. Malnar were right there with us," said Sergeant Dan "Moose" Bokemeyer, S-2 scout with Foxtrot Company. "[They were] up front where the action was."

For "utilizing and coordinating effective air strikes and artillery fire upon the hostile force, maintaining constant pressure on the enemy and thus denying him freedom of maneuverability," Lt. Col. Weise was given the Navy Cross.

Unfortunately, in spite of their heroics, the Leathernecks who fought at Dai Do went largely unnoticed. One of the most crucial battles during America's long involvement in that country received scant attention in the press. But among the individuals who served there it will never be forgotten.

"I waited and watched those Marines about to go into battle," wrote 2nd Lt. V. "Vic" Taylor: "Some were standing watch, some readied equipment, some slept or rested . . . but all were quiet. No nervous jabbering, no false bravado, no whining, no melodramatics . . . they were professionals."

As their predecessors before them, the men of 2/4 truly were the "Magnificent Bastards." □

Author Michael D. Harkins is, himself, a veteran of the Vietnam War serving with the 3rd Marine Division. Further readings: The War in the Northern Provinces *by Lt. Gen. Willard Pearson (official U.S. Army history);* The Vietnam Experience—1968 *by Clark Dougan and Stephen Weiss (Boston Publishing Company);* Memories of Dai Do *by Brig. Gen. William Weise (USMC ret.);* Marine Corps Gazette, *September 1987.*

From 1967 to 1969, Phil Davidson was MACV's eyes and ears. Now he tells us what he saw and heard.

By Colonel Harry G. Summers, Jr.

The Vietnam War—as seen through the eyes of the soldiers, sailors, airmen and Marines who met the enemy face-to-face at the tactical level—has been pictured time and again. And works that examine the war at the level of high strategy are also not rare. What has been missing is the link between these two levels—a work that examines the war at the operational level (known in earlier conflicts as the theater-of-war level) where battles combine to achieve the strategic purposes for which the war is being waged.

That gap has now been filled with Lt. Gen. Phil B. Davidson's *Vietnam at War: The History 1946-1976* (Presidio Press, Novato, Calif., 1988, $27.50). Retired from active duty in 1974, General Davidson spent much of the intervening 14 years researching and writing this 838-page examination of the three Vietnam wars—"Indochina War I between the Viet Minh and the French, Indochina War II between the United States/South Vietnam and North Vietnam/Viet Cong, and Indochina War III between North and South Vietnam."

General William C. Westmoreland inspects an ARVN Military Police School. Washington's strategy seemed to change more often than its commanders. Hanoi's grand strategy outlasted Giap.

Unlike many who write and pontificate on war, General Davidson not only knows the realities of the battlefield from firsthand experience but also has spent most of his military career studying the battlefield to understand and to predict enemy actions and activities. As a squadron commander with the 3rd Cavalry in Europe in World War II, he was wounded in action and won both the Silver and Bronze Stars for battlefield valor. During the Korean War, he served on General Douglas MacArthur's Far East Command G-2 (Intelligence) Staff, and during the Vietnam War he was first the ACSI (Assistant Chief of Staff for Intelligence) for the United States Army Pacific (USARPAC) from 1965 to 1967 and then the MACV-J2 (chief intelligence officer, Military Assistance Command Vietnam), first for General William C. Westmoreland and then for General Creighton Abrams, as each commanded in Saigon during 1967 to 1969.

If anyone has the "big picture" on Vietnam, it's General Davidson. Not only was he exposed to it during his time at USARPAC and MACV, but before that assignment he served as Commandant of the ASA (Army Security Agency) school. When he returned, he was not only the Army's ACSI, but also served as the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Intelligence.

The leitmotif for his book is North Vietnamese General Vo Ngugen Giap, who was Deputy Premier of North Vietnam and a member of the North Vietnamese Politburo, was North Vietnam's Minister of Defense, and Commander-in-Chief of the North Vietnamese Army (NVA). Giap, in short, was the enemy's strategic, operational and tactical commander, positions held by some 21 different individuals on the Allied side.

Following this thread, including the political infighting that took place on the other side, Davidson lays a solid foundation from which to understand America's direct military involvement in Vietnam. In fact, it is not until page 333 (a memorable number for Vietnam vets) that we reach 1965 and the events that triggered the "shift from 'helping the Vietnamese help themselves' to fighting a full-scale war on and over the land mass of Asia." To my mind, the most interesting part of his assessment of "Indochina War II" is his discussion of the Tet Offensive of 1968, especially since, as Westmoreland's chief intelligence officer, Davidson was responsible for assessing enemy intentions and for warning of impending enemy attacks.

In his introduction, General Davidson says that he wrote the book in order to "learn how the most powerful nation in the world won every battle in Vietnam—but lost the war." Almost eight hundred pages later, he states: "I know the answer—at least to my own satisfaction . . . *they had a superior grand strategy.*"

To sum it up," says General Davidson, "the United States lost the war in the way all wars are lost—to a superior strategy which availed itself of our political and psychological vulnerabilities while negating our great military strength . . . . Sad to say, we cannot counter revolutionary war even now—our defeat in Vietnam has taught us nothing."

One does not have to agree with his conclusions to appreciate that *Vietnam at War* is a masterful account of the operational dimension of the Vietnam war. It is highly recommended for all those

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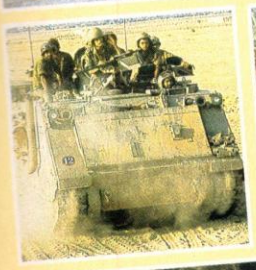

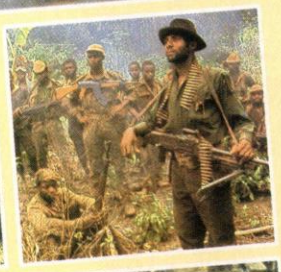

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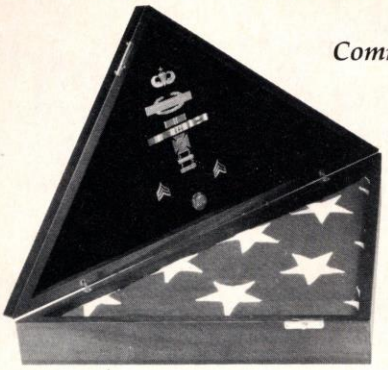

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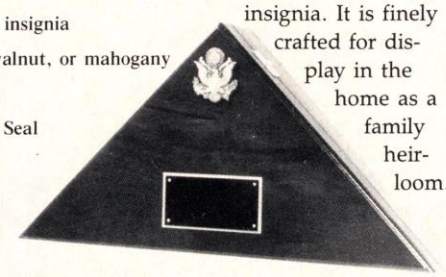

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who would know what the Vietnam battlefield was all about.

Air War Hanoi, *by Robert F. Dorr, Blandford Books, London, 1988, $24.95.*

It may well be said that the United States failed in its designs in Indochina because it never really geared itself for a war—only a series of battles with objectives that were never clearly defined. What the Vietnam conflict came down to, then, was a series of battles and, given the handicaps under which they fought, the American servicemen who did their vaguely defined duty there won most of the battles—on land, off the coast, on the rivers and in the air.

Few on the American side felt the limitations as dramatically as did the USAF and the Navy and Marine air arms in implementing the bombing of North Vietnam, in a series of campaigns that only half unleashed their capabilities until the last year of American involvement in the conflict.

Robert F. Dorr, an unapologetic air buff, has devoted his latest book, *Air War Hanoi,* to the chronicling in detail of a battle won within a war lost by America's airmen. After setting the stage of the conflict, Dorr covers the events and actions in day-to-day detail, from the Gulf of Tonkin incident in August 1964 through the final raids and air engagements of January 1973.

In addition to recounting the air strikes, dogfights, behind-the-scenes events and decisions, and the ordeal of the American POWs in enemy hands, Dorr describes the aircraft, the weapons and the strategies, appraising them and the changes they underwent.

Although information about the North Vietnamese side of the campaign is limited, the author draws upon a portion of what is available in order to provide a better understanding of what the American airmen were up against. But more details are known of the North Vietnamese defenders, especially their MiG pilots, than Dorr uses, leaving the book with a disproportionate pro-American slant.

Given the tremendous volume of research compiled on American air operations over North Vietnam, that omission causes the book to fall short of being the comprehensive history that it might have been. Aside from the thread of admiration for the airmen that runs throughout his narrative, the author presents a no-nonsense account with the in-the-cockpit touch of a pilot who "knows the language." All this adds up to making *Air War Hanoi* a first-rate reference source on its subject, one that allows the reader to see both the forest and the trees at the same time.

Jon Guttman

□FORCES□

Continued from page 10

black box. The MGF "Blackjack" activities kicked off in October 1966 with a patrol in Kontum Province lasting 30 days.)

Not that the Recondo concept (recon and commando) was actually born of the Vietnam War—on the contrary, the origin in modern terms was the British Army's Long-Range Desert Group deployed in North Africa during World War II. And later, during the Korean War, U.S. Army Rangers and British Commandos conducted joint "long-range" operations.

The American version continued to evolve during the late 1950s under Westmoreland himself, as commander of the 101st Airborne Division at Fort Campbell, Ky. Thus, the Recondo School that he dedicated at Nha Trang in September 1966 was in large part a creature of his own encouragement and commitment, as well as successor to Delta Project's training school in LRRP technique.

As "schools" go, this was a tough one to finish—the "drop-out" or failure rate averaged about 50 percent of all entrants, even though most already were combat veterans or graduates of "finishing schools" such as Ranger and Airborne training programs.

In addition to staffing conventional LRRP units attached to infantry brigades and divisions, the school produced personnel for Delta Project Recon, Sigma Project, and Omega Project. Also, many Recondo School graduates served as advisers to Mobile Strike Force (MSF), or with special MACV-SOG units such as Salem House, Daniel Boone and Blackjack, or with special indigenous units such as Hac Bao (the South Vietnamese "Black Panthers"). Other Recondos were advisers to mercenary units used with Eagle flight operations. And some served with the U.S. Marine's Force Recon.

In retrospect, it is fair to say that 5th Special Forces Group and the Recondo School were the heart and soul of most special-warfare units in Vietnam.

General Westmoreland, during the second half of 1965, had begun using Delta Project Recon teams as a source of detailed tactical intelligence. Although Delta Project was headquartered with 5th Special Forces Group in Nha Trang and staffed by 5th Group personnel, plus men temporarily attached from 1st Special Forces Group at Okinawa, it was funded and operationally controlled by General Westmoreland.

The deputy commander of the 1st Infantry Division was so impressed by Delta Recon that he asked to have a group of 1st Infantry men trained as "LRRPs" by Delta Project. By December

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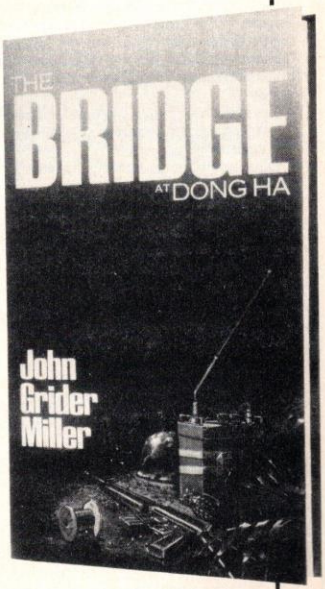

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1965, Delta Project received a group of men from the 1st Infantry for LRRP training at Nha Trang. That began a chain reaction.

Shortly thereafter, Delta began training 40 or 50 men from the 1st Air Cavalry Division. Next, Delta Project conducted an "in-house" training program for approximately 25 men from 5th and 1st Special Forces Groups.

Those classes marked the first time that Delta conducted a formal training cycle for replacements and led to the establishment of the Delta Project LRRP School.

The Delta Project LRRP School continued operating through the summer of 1966. Training cycles included students from a wide variety of units, such as 4th Infantry Division, 3rd Marine Amphibious Force (III MAF), Australian Army SAS Regiment, Republic of Korea (ROK) and Thai Army infantry divisions. The style of instruction underwent radical change as informal seminars became formal 50-minute classes. Physical training was constantly upgraded, including Recondo's notorious sandbag runs which, according to various instructors, ranged from one 30-pound sandbag carried for four miles to two 30-pound bags carried for 10 miles.

Despite the success of Delta's LRRP School, Colonel John Kelly was not entirely happy with the program. All instructors were members of Delta Recon who taught classes while on "stand-down" between combat missions, a factor that made it nearly impossible to schedule and conduct a comprehensive training program. Obviously, Delta's recon missions were more important than the training program, but on the other hand, General Westmoreland wanted more LRRPs and a formal LRRP/Recondo training school.

Since the Recondo concept had Westmoreland's complete endorsement, and MACV was funding Delta Project, Kelly put the two together and created the MACV-Recondo School.

A Recondo program of instruction which incorporated a training cycle of four weeks, was developed. One change was major and permanent: Students were dropped from the Delta and later the Recondo School if they did not complete the sandbag runs or failed tests on academic subjects such as communications, map-reading or intelligence.

The training at this school, however, could mean combat—and casualties—at the same time. During some cycles and throughout the last several months the school operated, some of its program missions were conducted in virtually safe areas such as Hon Tre Island. Most, though, were conducted in "hot" areas, and a relatively large number of men were killed or wounded. Chief Warrant Of-

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ficer "Duke" Payne of the 281st Assault Helicopter Company was killed during early 1970 in the mountains south of Nha Trang while piloting a chopper during a training mission. John Korsbeck, previously with the 3rd Special Forces Group before becoming a pilot with the 281st, recalls inserting a 100-man reaction force into the area south of Nha Trang called "Death Valley," following enemy contact by a student Recondo team.

Teams in cycle R-10-68 abandoned their proposed training missions when the insurgents throughout South Vietnam launched their 1968 Tet Offensive against every major city and most provincial and district capitals. Some of the student teams made assaults against enemy rocket sites near Nha Trang; others manned the perimeter defenses. Long-range recon principles were quickly exchanged for door-to-door street-fighting techniques. Formal graduation ceremonies were never held for the 39 students—the instructors just said "goodbye" and "good luck."

Shortly after the attack on the U.S. Embassy in Saigon during Tet, Raker 13, an operational LRRP team that had been in cycle R-10-68, was flown to Saigon. After fighting its way out of Tan Son Nhut airport, the team was almost wiped out at the U.S. Embassy by an ARVN unit. After withdrawing from Saigon, the team was dropped into War Zone D to ambush retreating NVA units. Prior to enrolling in Recondo cycle R-10-68, Raker 13 had been running missions in War Zone D. The team had been inserted in AO Swallow on 18 December 1987 and two days later had to call air strikes on its position in order to break contact with NVA units the team had followed into the headquarter's base camp of the 110th NVA Regiment (Independent).

The writer, as Raker's team leader now after Tet, was asked to join other LRRP team leaders for a special ambush mission against NVA and VC units retreating from Saigon to the Binh Son rubber plantation.

The following day, February 17, 1968, 10 LRRPs were inserted into a "hot" LZ inside the plantation. Five LRRPs staked out a major trail junction, while the writer, along with Staff Sgt. David Sellens, Specialist 4 Thomas Eggleton and a staff sergeant from the 101st Airborne, strung Claymore mines along another trail.

Just as we finished wiring 10 Claymores, three NVA soldiers, including one with an RPG-7 rocket-grenade launcher, came along the trail, quickly followed by another 30 NVA soldiers in full battle gear. I blew the mines and along with Sellens ran out to deal with NVA soldiers still alive. Suddenly, all hell broke loose. Sellens and I were hit by

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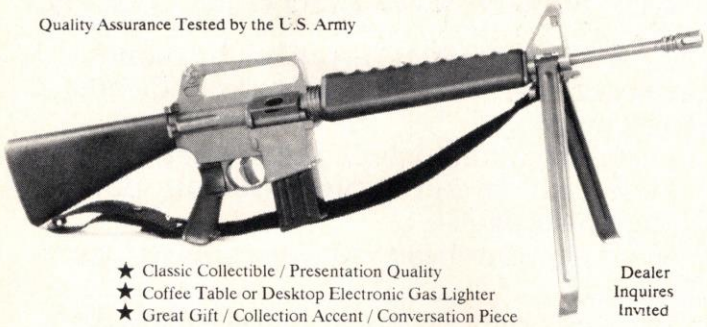

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grenades, and Eggleton took an armor-piercing round through both legs. We realized we had hit the point element of a much larger NVA unit. An infantry battalion from the 9th Division was inserted to reinforce our LRRP team members, who were found among 29 dead NVA soldiers on the trail.

By 1969, ground operations by U.S. combat forces had been drastically reduced and, consequently, so were LRRP activities. Some LRRP units were disbanded as 140,000 American soldiers were withdrawn from Vietnam between April 1969 and July 1970. As U.S. combat units were sent home or placed in defensive positions, recon operations were abandoned.

Many combat soldiers with special-warfare training were transferred to the MACV pacification program known as CORDS, an acronym for "Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support." CORDS had over 6,000 U.S. military personnel on its roles during early 1970. Approximately 600 former military personnel were working in the controversial Phoenix program, which CORDS had taken over from the CIA on July 1, 1969. Other U.S. Army LRRPs were working as advisers to ARVN combat units. One of the last training cycles at the Recondo school included personnel from Company L, 75th Infantry (Airborne), the former LRRP unit with the 101st Airborne Division. Although still assigned to the 101st, some of the men were advisers to the company-size ARVN strike-force unit known as Hac Bao (Black Panthers), which mainly operated along the DMZ and in the A Shau Valley. Hac Bao generally conducted "bomb damage assessment" (better known as "BDAs") or "hot-pursuit" missions. The so-called LRRPs usually followed Hac Bao's point element and handled communications.

After the last Recondo training cycle was conducted in 1970, Delta Project had ceased operations, its compound soon destroyed by looters. Special Mission Advisory Group (SMAG) personnel began using the Recondo school compound during the end of 1970, and many of the Recondo school cadre were transferred to SMAG.

Norman Doney, then on his third tour in Vietnam, was the official representative of all Special Force's A-Team sergeants in Vietnam during the official stand-down of the 5th SFG on February 24, 1971, when the compound was transferred to SMAG. While there will never be another MACV-Recondo or Delta Project LRRP school, each year new generations of U.S. infantry soldiers still are learning the techniques and tactics developed by Recondo-trained LRRPs in Vietnam. □

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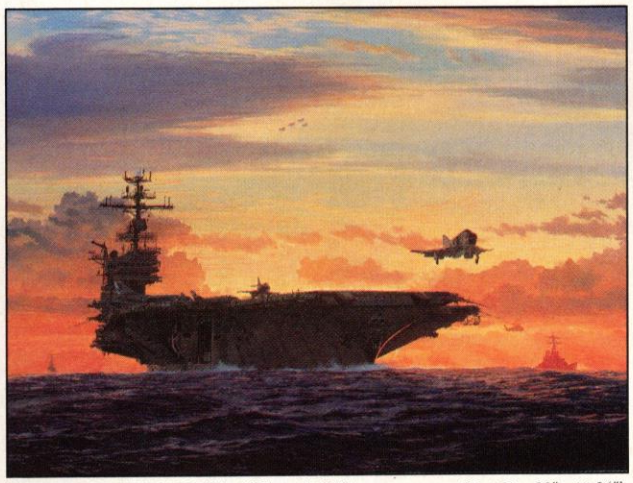

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Recreation sites in the Vietnam War offered different strokes for different folks.

By Shelby L. Stanton

When a new soldier arrived in Vietnam for his combat tour "fresh from the land of the big PX"—as the troops referred to the United States—he usually faced a grueling year of hardship or rugged combat in the tropical wilderness of Vietnam. The soldier's duty was always a dangerous and difficult task, whether it was driving a Rome Plow 'dozer, carrying a rifle, or drilling water wells at a remote Special Force campsite.

Early in the war, the Army recognized that soldiers could reach a breaking point unless they were offered an opportunity to forget the immediacy of the battlefield. To improve morale and stifle loneliness, the Army introduced a range of activities at recreation sites in and out of the war zone, designed to reinvigorate morale. Such programs existed in World Wars I and II and Korea.

Each soldier came to Vietnam either voluntarily or involuntarily (through the draft), but once there, most performed the assigned job to the best of their ability. Many were driven by patriotism, unit esprit, or the comradeship of shared danger, but such personal qualities needed to be reinforced by organizational assurance of individual freedom.

A couple of officers from the 9th Division on R and R "borrow" a "trickshaw" (a bicycle-powered rickshaw) at My Tho. The U.S. military arranged an international array of options for GIs.

Individual morale was threatened in Vietnam by many influences beyond the propaganda of the enemy or the vehement heckling of anti-war civilians back home. A soldier's first few months in Southeast Asia was a time for radical adjustment to a foreign and often hostile land. The primitive countryside and facilities often compounded the sense of disorientation and isolation.

Anxiety and homesickness were intermingled constantly with the uncertainty of death or disfigurement on some distant patrol, helicopter flight, or convoy movement. Whether in the role of "grunt" or combat service support, a soldier's strain increased with each month in Vietnam, and was a drain on the soldier's fighting spirit.

In addition to the problems of survival, nearly all servicemen in Vietnam encountered the problem of boredom. No matter what job a soldier fulfilled in wartime, there were many times that he would just remain in his bunker or barracks and stare at the ceiling. Unit sergeants often spotted this malaise between missions or after intense working sessions when their soldiers had nothing to do.

The armed forces instituted the R and R program to counter these morale-defeating influences. "R and R" was the traditional military abbreviation for Rest and Recreation, or Rest and Recuperation, but the common reference by the troops in Vietnam was "Romeo and Romeo," a polite description for the sort of activity that often transpired during a soldier's participation in the program.

Once during his combat tour, the soldier could take a week off and visit one of seven R and R sites away from Vietnam. These sites included Tokyo, Sydney, Taipei, Bangkok, Manila, Hong Kong and Hawaii. Each location offered something different, an interesting variety of leisure options. All had good choices for relaxing, sightseeing, or great buys on items that cost much more in America. In the case of Hawaii, one could even spend a week with a wife or girlfriend from the United States. Needless to say, the R and R experience was the largest morale-boosting program in Vietnam and the one most appreciated by the soldier.

The Special Services was in charge of making sure that the R and R experience met the soldier's expectations. The Military Assistance Command Vietnam (MACV) was determined that its soldiers should feel like first-class tourists on their week off from the war. Virtually everything was done by the command to see that the soldier thoroughly enjoyed his R and R. There were currency exchange points conveniently located in designated R and R hotels and accurate, informal information regarding individual desires.

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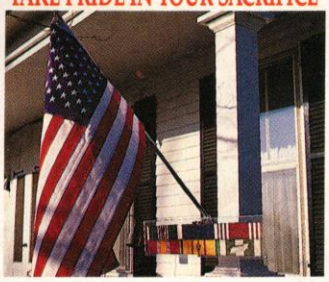

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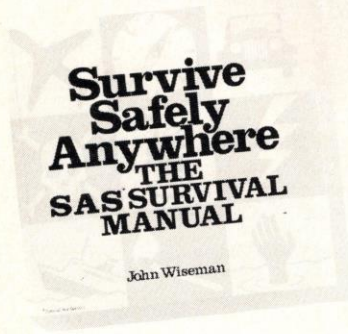

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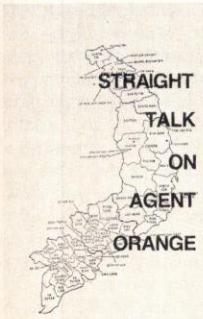

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out mortar or shellfire. For the commander, it was a way to refresh his men so they could face another six months of warfare. More than 25,000 men per month went on out-of-country R and R during the Vietnam conflict.

The hardest part of the R and R program for the average trooper was deciding where to go.

Tokyo was only moderately popular with the soldiers. The city was very crowded and expensive for Americans even during the 1960s. The Tokyo "red light" district was interesting, but well-policed and therefore less appealing than other alternatives.

One of the big drawbacks of Tokyo was the proximity of the city to several military complexes manned by the United States military. Soldiers were guaranteed a trip to Japan if they were too badly wounded for the doctors in Vietnam to handle, but not to the point they had to be sent home to the United States for very advanced specialized treatment—or burial. This gloomy fact certainly dampened the Tokyo appeal.

Sydney, Australia, was a big R and R hit. The Australians extended their usual good hospitality, tolerated a high amount of drunken behavior, and were always extremely friendly. Hotel accommodations in Australia offered the latest in modern conveniences, although the prices were relatively high compared to other R and R selections.

Taipei, Taiwan, was reputedly selected as an R and R site to appease Chiang Kai-shek and his Nationalist Chinese regime. The United States was politically very interested in maintaining good relations with Taiwan during the Vietnam War. One officer told the author that the Taipei R and R center was an attempt to get American currency into their economy. This was not altogether true. Although the city was full of squalor and short on tourist appeal in the 1960s, being in the grip of a virtual police state, some soldiers enjoyed Taipei immensely.

Bangkok, Thailand, was undoubtedly the most popular R and R center. This was a bustling city full of mixed contrasts and offered everything anyone could ask for or dream about. There was a large military community in Thailand, which curiously was both part of, and removed from the war in Vietnam. The greatest appeal of Bangkok was its breathtaking scenery, sightseeing opportunities and exquisite night life.

Bangkok was a favorite tourist center for Europeans both before and during the Vietnam War. Its classy hotels and superb entertainment were both affordable and rich in diversity. The old saying went that you could get anything you wanted in Bangkok. The Thai people were beautiful, and the downtown bar

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district was always alive with excitement at reasonable prices.

Manila was another R and R choice that beckoned many soldiers. The city was undergoing modernization during the Vietnam War and contained some decent hotels. Some even had air conditioning. Unfortunately, the Bay-front area of Manila was pretty steep price-wise. Manila was appealing in regards to its shopping opportunities, especially for brassware and the like, and the famed "Manila by night" was best described in 1960-era parlance as "a tumultuous explosion that's found a place to happen."

Manila offered countless night spots, some of which featured American singers and hostesses to dance with. Unfortunately, the better clubs were rather splashy affairs with high prices. Manila was also close to the big Navy base at Subic Bay, and some of its "dives" were the reputed haunts of Navy SEAL teams resting between Vietnam missions. Some returnees related that Manila's good times were tempered by its violence.

Hong Kong was always popular as an R and R location. Hong Kong was justly famous for a very fine shopping district and high-quality night life, all at reasonable prices. The British presence predominated in Hong Kong during the Vietnam War, and one of the city's main attractions was that it offered English fluency in an oriental setting. There were floating restaurants, harbor sightseeing excursions, and a wide range of other exotic avenues to explore. Hong Kong presented opportunities for the soldier in search of adventure and excitement, but it was a rather busy and hectic place.

Hawaii was the place to go if a soldier just wanted to get back on American soil or meet a wife or girlfriend. This was a long plane ride otherwise, and Hawaii was easily the most expensive of all the R and R areas. The soldier, however, could feel at home in Hawaii, and it was the perfect answer for the serviceman who wanted nothing to do with the Orient during his treasured week away from Vietnam and the war.

There were other R and R sites, such as Singapore, which were available from time to time. Singapore was a very interesting city to visit, but its expense made it unpopular compared with others existing choices. Singapore was usually considered one step up from Bangkok in price, nightlife quality and accommodations for those who were interested in a more polished environment.

In many cases, soldiers preferred to stay in Vietnam. There was an "in-country R and R" site at Vung Tau, a very beautiful shoreline resort along the South China Sea not far from Saigon. This relaxation period was a three-day affair in which soldiers could stretch out on

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the beach, eat fine food at the fancy enlisted dining room, watch free movies, and enjoy superb recreational facilities. The Vung Tau site offered a great change of pace and scenery for those remaining in Vietnam. During the war, about 9,000 troops a month went to Vung Tau.

The "R and R set" at Vung Tau drew heavily from Special Forces and special mission outfit members, who often spoke Vietnamese and arranged to spend the whole period on "wild excursions." A commander of the 5th Special Forces Group once related to the author how one highly decorated trooper, known for taking extreme liberties while "loosening up," destroyed most of the enlisted hotel in a spree of drunken play. Fortunately, no one was killed.

The brass was furious when informed of the incident and initially wanted court-martial charges brought, but relented after hearing how much imagination and stamina the sergeant had displayed. The higher-ups dropped all charges, stating that the man simply got a little overexcited and never meant to harm government property—only knocking down a couple of buildings accidentally.

A few soldiers actively tried to avoid R and R. Although it is almost impossible to believe, there are recorded instances of commanders having to order certain people out of the field. One SOG (Studies and Observation Group) sergeant spent years on long-range missions. A new commander finally ordered him out of the field to relax and spend his free time in any manner he chose. Later, the SOG trooper was spotted by the same officer at a remote launching site for cross-border operations. It turned out that this professional soldier's way of relaxing was going into Laos and killing enemy soldiers.

The Army also featured additional base camp entertainment facilities on most of its Vietnam installations. The best known were the service clubs. These were facilities run by the Special Services. There were 22 clubs in Vietnam which stretched from the far north in Quang Tri all the way south to Soc Trang in the Mekong Delta. A service club was usually a good place to relax with buddies. The clubs offered pool tables, ping pong, cards, all types of games, and special holiday activities. The clubs featured many kinds of musical instruments and even private music rooms where soldiers could practice and even form small bands.

Whether in Vietnam-oriented service clubs and relaxation areas or out-of-country R and R sites, the Vietnam-era soldier enjoyed a wide choice of locations and opportunities to temporarily forget the demanding hardships of war. □

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□PERSONALITY□

Continued from Page 8

company records. He would pick them up the next day, he assured them. Unexpectedly, the Communists overran the airfield during the night. Friends hid the stranded aviators in a walled schoolyard and alerted CAT's Tsingtao base, 90 miles away on the Yellow Sea.

When rescue pilot Richard Kruske flew his single-engine, high-wing Stinson L-5 over the schoolyard, he realized it was under 400 feet long and flanked by buildings that allowed only eight feet of clearance at each wingtip. Somehow, Kruske landed safely but, upon trying to take off with Burridge, smashed the tiny two-seater into a wall. A second L-5 borrowed from the U.S. Marines by Edwin Trout also was damaged in the schoolyard. So far, no one was hurt.

After McGovern flew his C-47 over his four grounded colleagues and dropped repair materials, Kruske and Burridge wobbled aloft to safety. Two more planes flew in, a Piper Cub piloted by Marshall Staynor and another L-5 flown by Robert Rousselot. The Cub soon took to the air with Staynor and Trout, but the L-5 whacked straight into a wall. And when Staynor again flew the Cub back, he broke the propeller during his landing.

All of this activity had not gone unnoticed by the Communists, who began closing in on the American trio. McGovern, returning with a replacement propeller, was prepared. Part of his cargo consisted of empty beer bottles. As they dropped, whistling like bombs, the Chinese troops ran for cover. Meanwhile, Plank got the repaired Cub off the ground. Kruske then came back and rescued Staynor. That night, transport planes drew the enemy's attention away from the still-trapped Rousselot with small bombs. The last CAT pilot was flown out to the accompaniment of howling bottles hurtling earthward from McGovern's C-47.

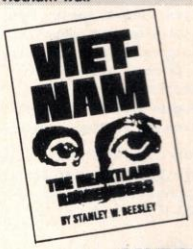
Flying numerous hazardous missions, McGovern remained lucky until December 4, 1949. On a night flight in a twin-engine C-46 from Hong Kong to the southern city of Kunming with cargo and two passengers, he was forced to belly-land in enemy territory. No one was injured, but all were quickly captured.

Months passed. Then, on May 31, complaining that walking had been the worst part of his ordeal, McGovern suddenly appeared in Hong Kong, lighter by 60 pounds. Naturally, says the McGoon legend, the Chicoms had released him as he was simply too much for them to feed or put up with.

Briefly returning to the United States to regain health and weight, McGovern

VIETNAM

"Now I got four men instantly dead, seven others dying they're hurt so bad. I'm wounded. I can't hear. I'm yelling into the radio for medevacs and I don't even know if they're on. I just yelled into the phone, 'TL one-three is down. WIA. Four KIA. Seven WIA, critical.' There is no one left standing but me." — Billy Walkabout, Ranger Team Leader, 101st Airborne Division, the most decorated soldier of the Vietnam war.



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was soon back in Asia. By this time, three events had occurred to bring the career of Earthquake McGoon to its climax. The U.S. Central Intelligence Agency acquired control of CAT. Secondly, Mao Tse Tung completed his takeover of mainland China, chasing Chiang's forces—and CAT—to the island of Taiwan. Finally, the Viet Minh were heating up their war to chase France out of the southeastern bulge of Asia. The U.S. Government agreed to provide limited aid to the French, mostly in the form of equipment. In the fall of 1951, McGovern volunteered to pilot CAT flights over Southeast Asia, flying everything from economic aid to secret photography missions for the CIA.

In 1954, the French tried to lure the Viet Minh into an air-supplied setpiece battle in which they could smash the Communists once and for all. The site selected was an 11-by-5 mile valley nearly 200 miles west of Hanoi—Dien Bien Phu. French forces under Colonel Christian de Castries established nine defensive positions, all given feminine names, and two airstrips in a 33-square mile oblong beside the Nam Yum River. It was one of the greatest miscalculations in military history. By April 1954, more than 15,000 French "hunters" had becomethe prey of some 50,000 Viet Minh under General Vo Nguyen Giap. Hundreds of cannons, pounded the French outposts from the dominating hills. Antiaircraft guns wrought havoc with the aerial supply program. It was to be a 56-day siege ending with more than 7,000 French and an estimated 22,900 Viet Minh killed, wounded or missing.

Again, the French turned to America for help. Under operation SQUAW II (SQUAW I was a 1953 Laotian supply program), 24 CAT pilots, including McGovern, would fly a dozen USAF-provided C-119s for "from $800 to $1,000 for 60 hours of flying a month, plus a $10-an-hour combat bonus" to help the French airlift supplies to Dien Bien Phu.

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Virtually every C-119 was hit sometime during its harrowing three-minute run down "the slot" to its drop zone. On one occasion, McGovern was climbing after a drop when .50-caliber slugs sliced his plane's elevator controls, sending the bulky aircraft spinning earthward. The pilot, regaining level flight, complained about having "a little trouble driving this thing." When he finally landed the bucking Boxcar, McGovern said, "Now I

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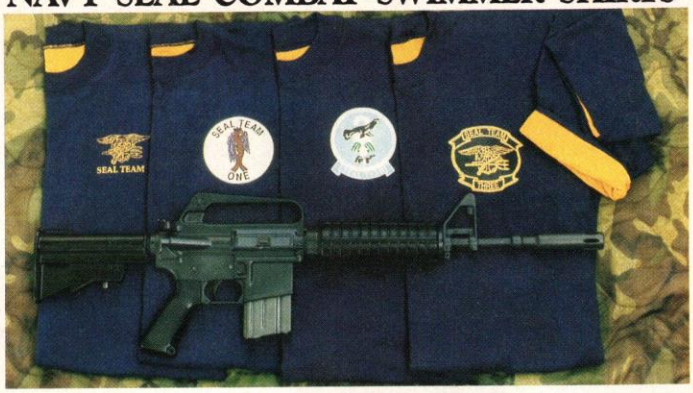

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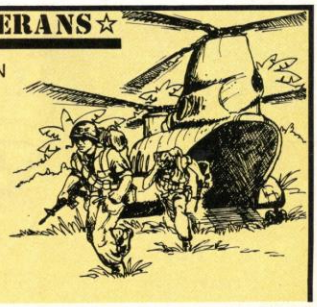

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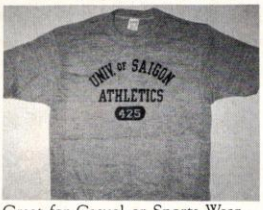

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know how it feels to ride a kangaroo."

During one of his flights, the American dropped a personal package for de Castries—a set of general's stars and a bottle of champagne. The chief defender of Dien Bien Phu had been promoted to brigadier general. With ominous irony, the parachuted package drifted into the Communist lines.

Then came that fateful Thursday afternoon of May 6, 1954. An hour and a half out of Cat Bi, McGovern spiraled Bird Two down toward his assigned drop zone, the isolated southernmost outpost the French had named Isabelle. This was the heavyweight pilot's 46th SQUAW II sortie. His copilot was 28-year-old Wallace A. Buford, native of Ogden, Utah, and veteran of both World War II and Korea. Behind them, two French crewmen prepared to drop a cannon attached to three parachutes.

Thud! McGovern's plane shuddered from the hit of a Viet Minh 37mm shell. "We've got a direct hit," radioed McGovern. Kusak maneuvered over to the striken Boxcar. The left wing's leading edge was damaged and the engine was spewing oil. McGovern feathered the propeller. A second hit, this time in the right boom tail section. Like an injured bird streaming black blood, the aircraft sideslipped, nearly hitting Kusak's plane.

"Bail out," Kusak radioed. "I'll call for a rescue helicopter."

"No way, I don't want to be captured and do all that walking again. Give me the best heading for Haipong over low ground," said McGovern as he fought to control the dropping plane. He managed to restart the damaged engine. Kusak talked him over some ridges toward a stream where he could attempt a belly landing.

"Turn right!" Kusak called out. Whether his words went unheard or the descending C-119 wouldn't respond to McGoverns' attempts at control will never be known.

"Looks like this is it, son," McGovern calmly said. His plane's left wingtip hit the slope of the stream bed, sending the C-119 into cartwheels before the plane enveloped itself in an exploding blanket of flame. The man known as Earthquake McGoon and his copilot Buford died, the first Americans killed in action during the Vietnam War. By some miracle, the French crewmen survived.

The very next day, at 5:30 p.m., Dien Bien Phu fell to the Viet Minh.

Southeast Asia's recent wars wove cocoons of legend around a number of characters who never quite fit the traditional mold, yet performed unorthodox tasks outstandingly well. But certainly one of the most colorful was the giant of an improbability known as Earthquake McGoon. □

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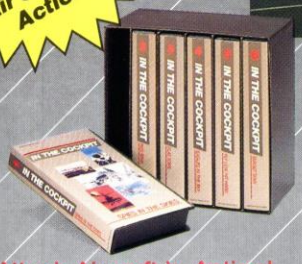

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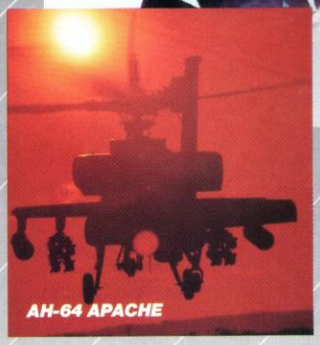

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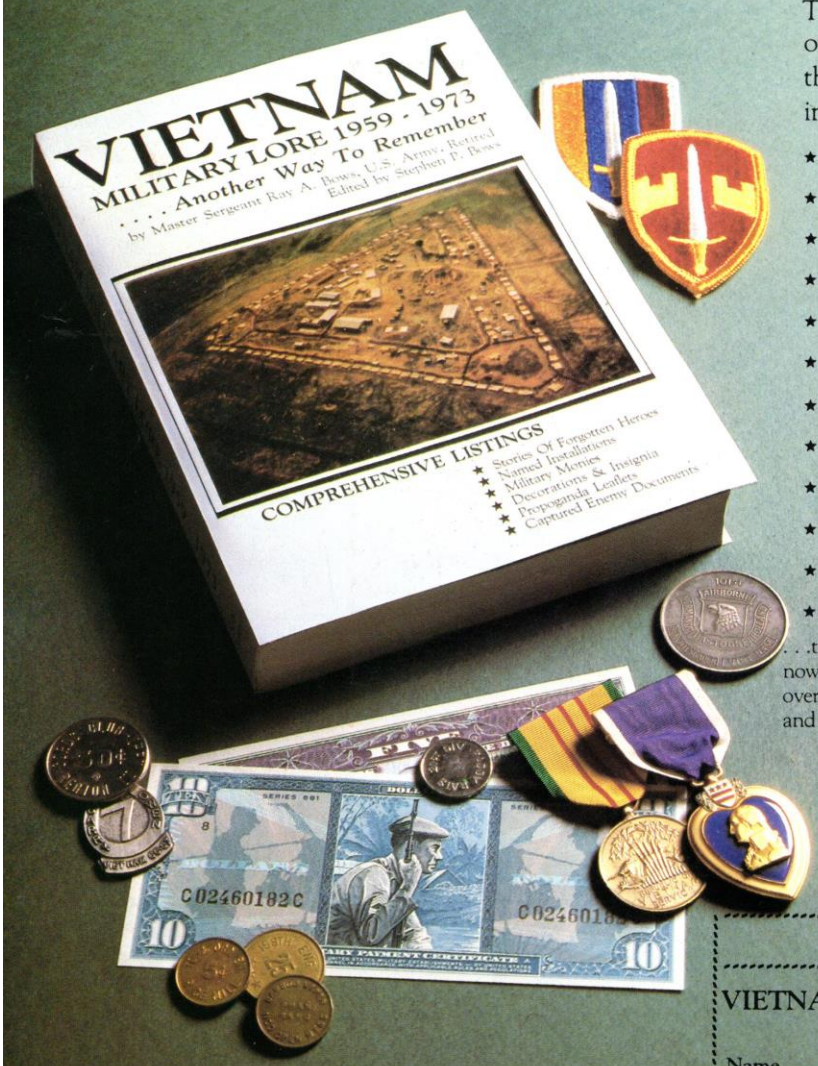
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